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Vrist Rønn, Kira

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The Multifaceted Norm of Objectivity in Intelligence Practices

Abstract

Intelligence doctrines and textbooks on intelligence practices across a range of liberal democracies all describe *objectivity* as a central norm of intelligence work. However, the core meaning of objectivity is rarely fleshed out in a unified way. It seems to reflect a range of different perceptions, for example that the persons involved in the process of intelligence acquisition should be treated fairly; that intelligence professionals should minimise influence from cognitive biases; that analysts should be neutral and apolitical; or simply that subjectivity should be reduced. Since appeals to objectivity in general guide us when we are evaluating trustworthiness and legitimacy, we need to know what we mean when we talk about objectivity, as well as how we can ensure it and where we should look in order to determine to what extent intelligence practices are objective. This article maps and discusses various notions of objectivity in intelligence practices, such as interpretation-free, value-free and value-neutral. It argues that objectivity reflects at least five different norms that are irreducible to one another. By drawing on the multifaceted articulations of objectivity within the philosophy of science, a range of different meanings of objectivity is identified in the context of intelligence work. Fleshing out the complexity of intelligence objectivity reveals new subtleties that have so far not been elaborated in intelligence theory.

Key words: Objectivity, theory of intelligence, scientification of intelligence practices, professionalisation.

Introduction

Objectivity is a key norm in traditional contexts such as science and law, and generally signifies the quality of epistemic processes or claims in a specific domain. If knowledge-acquisition processes are considered objective, they boost both the legitimacy of and trust in these claims. Subsequently, objectivity boosts the trustworthiness of the decisions based on these claims. On the other hand, if reasoning processes and claims lack objectivity (for example, if they are problematically biased or subjective), this would be an argument for distrusting and disregarding the claims and decisions arising from them.¹ Hence, objectivity is a powerful and important norm when deciding whether to rely on knowledge claims within, for example, science and law.

Similarly, objectivity constitutes one of the most frequently mentioned norms or principles in intelligence practices.² Both observers³ and practitioners⁴ have underlined the importance of objectivity in relation to both intelligence processes and products, in order to ensure the legitimacy of and trust in these practices. In the Joint Doctrine Publication issued by the UK Ministry of Defence, objectivity is considered one of the key ‘principles of intelligence’ and is defined as follows: ‘Intelligence must be unbiased, undistorted, intellectually honest and

free of prejudice.⁵ The emphasis on objectivity in intelligence could be viewed as a response to recent cases of politicisation and flawed intelligence procedures and products.⁶ The manufactured intelligence for the claimed existence of WMD in Iraq serves as a paradigmatic case of the politicisation of intelligence, one that is often referenced when arguing for the urgency of an increased focus on objectivity and professionalisation of intelligence practices.⁷ Hence the striving for objectivity – or more commonly, the attempt to avoid its opposite⁸ – mirrors an ongoing professionalisation of intelligence practices, in which existing norms from established domains such as science and law are applied to the intelligence context in order to legitimise and boost the trustworthiness of intelligence practices.⁹

Apparently, this striving for professionalisation stands out as a progressive development within intelligence communities, in which key norms and concepts are increasingly specified to facilitate professional and self-aware conduct. However, this article argues that there seems to be a tendency to uncritically transfer key concepts and norms such as objectivity from other non-intelligence domains without paying attention to the context-specific elements of intelligence practices. By drawing on distinctions and discussions from the philosophy of science, this article focuses on some of the core philosophical questions concerning the application of the objectivity norm in intelligence practices – for example, what does objectivity in intelligence practices mean? Can the ideal be achieved? And is it worth striving for – if so, why, and which objectivity concepts in particular?¹⁰

Objectivity is used intermittently in the intelligence context as a norm describing (in one way or another) all aspects of the intelligence cycle: from striving to collect and process *objective data* to the struggle for *objective* and *unbiased intelligence analysis* and the *un-politicised dissemination* of intelligence conclusions.¹¹ Despite the fact that objectivity is a consistent norm throughout the various phases of the intelligence process, phase-specific notions of objectivity are rarely fleshed out and discussed. In this article, I argue that objectivity as an epistemic norm within intelligence practices has found inspiration in existing distinctions from both the *scientific* and the *legal* domain. Scientific objectivity mainly focuses on knowledge claims and knowledge-acquisition processes,¹² whereas legal objectivity is concerned with procedural justice, the search for the material truth and fairness vis-à-vis the state and citizens.¹³

In this article, I flesh out some of the key ways in which objectivity is articulated and applied as an epistemic norm in intelligence practices. I identify five central notions of objectivity in intelligence literature and practices, which are not reducible to one another. In the intelligence-collection phase, there is a common perception that the information gathered should be objective or raw. Here, objectivity is understood as *interpretation-free* (1). In the analytical phase, intelligence objectivity denotes the virtues of both the analysts and the intelligence products, such as being *value-free* (2), *value-neutral* (3) or *detached* (4). Finally, intelligence objectivity (mainly in the domestic/police intelligence context) is articulated as a matter of *procedural justice* (5), in which citizens who have attracted the attention and suspicion of intelligence services should be treated equally and fairly, in ways that avoid placing citizens under unreasonable suspicion.

The article is structured as follows. First, I describe and discuss examples of these distinct concepts of intelligence objectivity by drawing on distinctions and discussions from epistemology and the philosophy of science. I critically discuss the attainability of each of these norms in the intelligence domain and argue that each of these specific categories of intelligence objectivity places different requirements on different intelligence actors and procedures. Finally, I turn to the current professionalisation of the intelligence domain and argue that focusing on intelligence- and context-specific nuances is pivotal to this process. In this way, I address some specifications of what we mean when we talk about objectivity in this context – and whether or to what extent striving for intelligence objectivity should continue to constitute a key norm within intelligence practices.

Objectivity as Interpretation-Free

In most versions of the intelligence cycle, *collection of information* is a key element in the first quarter of the intelligence process (after identifying a target/setting priorities).¹⁴ While objectivity has previously mainly been discussed in relation to intelligence analysis, objectivity as a norm also exists as a virtue pertaining to the bits and pieces of information collected. Consequently, intelligence practitioners commonly describe the initial collection phase as a process of identifying and selecting ‘raw intelligence’ or ‘raw data’, which is later analysed and processed into intelligence products.¹⁵

Within intelligence practices, raw data is collected via the various INT-disciplines (HUMINT, SIGINT, IMINT, etc.).¹⁶ As the term ‘raw’ signifies, this data is understood as bits and pieces that have not yet been ‘chewed’, ‘cooked’ or subjected to human interpretation. This norm of obtaining ‘interpretation-free’ information reflects one concept of intelligence objectivity, and is particularly visible during the collection phase. Human interference is therefore understood as a process in which these pieces of raw information are converted into less objective – or even subjective – information.

Interestingly, this understanding of *intelligence objectivity* reflects what Lisa Gitelman and Virginia Jackson present as a common presumption (e.g. in scientific circles) – that pure data only becomes subjective when it is subjected to human interpretation.¹⁷ In this sense, intelligence objectivity resembles a virtue associated with data-bits in the *mind-independent world*, before they are interpreted by ‘imperfect’ and subjective human agents.¹⁸ It also reflects an *assembly line-like*, positivistic perception of knowledge acquisition, in which the collected raw data exists in exactly the same form independently of the person who collects and processes it.¹⁹

In order to flesh out this notion of *intelligence objectivity* as *interpretation-free*, it is relevant to ask what kind of data we are talking about when we talk about raw, objective data in an intelligence context. In what sense, if any, can such data be considered raw and objective? Furthermore, what is meant by interpretation-free data? These questions will illuminate how intelligence objectivity is articulated and applied, and the answers will flesh out some of the potential implications of applying this specific concept of objectivity in intelligence practices.

In their article ‘The Raw is Cooked’, Räsänen and Nyce addressed the perception and use of the term ‘raw intelligence’ amongst intelligence practitioners.²⁰ The following quote encapsulates one of their main points:

These practitioners [intelligence practitioners] seem to operate on the premise that the data they collect and receive from a variety of sources (from individuals, signals, and sensors among them) are ‘raw’ both in origin and in essence. In effect, these practitioners assume that it is through their own interpretive labour that data become something other than raw.²¹

Hence, the raw and interpretation-free virtues ascribed to intelligence-collection practices seem to reflect attributes pertaining to epistemological realism, in which facts about the world are understood as neutral and

mind-independent.²² Räsänen and Nyce are highly sceptical of this perception of raw data, and go on to argue that ‘[...] this data has already been (prior) processed by the work practices, political, practical, and other decisions even before data collection occurs’.²³ Specifically, Räsänen and Nyce argue against the common understanding that the collectors do not interpret data when selecting relevant pieces and assigning specific labels to the data, for example when storing it in intelligence databases for later use. They assert that there is no such thing as raw, uninterpreted data – an understanding shared by most scholars in the field of science and technology studies.²⁴ According to Räsänen and Nyce, upholding the raw ideal entails a risk that the cultural and contextual aspects of bits of information are overlooked. They argue that the analytical and interpretational process starts before any bits and pieces of information are selected and collected. To overlook this initial interpretational process is to problematically parse and ignore the importance of the interpretive role of the individual intelligence practitioner.²⁵

In order to illustrate these dynamics, Helene Gundhus has written about the proliferation of intelligence practices and intelligence logics within police organisations, for example via the spread of *intelligence-led policing* as a common strategy.²⁶ She has recently studied the collection and processing of information by street-level officers and intelligence analysts. In line with Räsänen and Nyce, she characterises this collection process as an attempt to *objectify* and *decontextualise* the collected information.²⁷ The process starts, for example, with a street-level officer’s experience and interpretation of a specific situation. This experience is then transferred to an intelligence database for later use in a different analytical context. Gundhus argues that during this *datafication* of an event, the professional (subjective) interpretation and discretion pertaining to identifying the relevance of a specific piece of information is ‘washed out’ of the information. This occurs when the information is entered into an intelligence database, where it appears as uncontested facts or raw data-bits, despite the previous interpretation by the street-level officer. Gundhus argues that this tendency to objectify what is inherently subjective is problematic, since it wrongly confers authority upon specific pieces of information and potentially leads to misleading conclusions and unwarranted actions.²⁸

Furthermore, other scholars such as Brayne (2007) and Egbert and Leese (2021) have argued against a common perception within big data-driven police practices such as *predictive policing* to enable neutral and objective representations of the world. Egbert and Leese state that ‘Creating crime data means trying to fit

messy and ambiguous empirical reality into predefined bureaucratic classification systems'.²⁹ In this process, officers choose fragments of empirical reality, and their selection is founded in preconceptions regarding crime, victims, offenders and what would normally constitute relevant information.

Despite the context and type of collection discipline, viewing the intelligence-collection phase as an interpretation-free zone seems to be an unachievable norm, as is further emphasised in the work of contemporary philosophy of science scholars.³⁰ To some extent, this striving for non-interpretation appears to be not simply unachievable, but also an undesirable norm, since it blurs the understanding of the inherently interpretive nature of almost all types of intelligence-collection disciplines.³¹ Similarly, in his thought-provoking article on analytical objectivity, Stephen Marrin describes the use of the term 'raw data' as an expression of 'epistemological naivete'.³² In line with Räsänen and Nyce, this article would go even further, and claim that objectivity understood as 'raw' and 'interpretation-free' data in the context of intelligence is not simply innocent and naïve, since this articulation runs the risk of masking the inherently interpretative nature of the intelligence-collection phase. As illustrated in the opening quote of this article, Douglas emphasises that there is an epistemic power embedded in the appeal to objectivity. In other words, the designation of objectivity boosts the trust in and legitimacy of knowledge claims and subsequent actions. Upholding this norm of objectivity as interpretation-free within intelligence practices contributes to *a masquerade* in which a pseudo-objectivity runs the risk of conferring unwarranted legitimacy upon collected bits of information. Furthermore, this 'masquerade' makes it inherently difficult to enhance the work of the intelligence profession. If we continuously uphold a flawed version of existing norms, we will be unable to qualify and develop core intelligence practices, since we will continuously refer to these practices in unspecific and even misleading terms that fail to embrace and value the collecting officers' own agency and interpretative skills. In order to further specify and discuss the norm of objectivity pertaining to the collection of information, scholars and practitioners within intelligence studies could find inspiration in current distinctions from social constructivist schools of social science, such as *Science and Technology Studies*, in which the co-construction of reality between human and non-human actors constitutes a basic condition for knowledge processes.³³

Analytical Objectivity

As discussed in the previous section, in the intelligence-collection phase, objectivity is commonly understood as being ‘free from interpretation’. With regard to intelligence analysis, objectivity is often articulated as a norm that denotes various versions of *being value-free*.³⁴ The analytical phase of the intelligence process is therefore more obviously a process that is *per se* characterised by human interpretation of the collected pieces of information.³⁵ Here, objectivity reflects a different norm than objectivity in the intelligence-collection phase, since analytical objectivity mirrors the ways in which intelligence analysts engage with and interpret the collected information and turn it into intelligence products. Objectivity is therefore understood as something that can be achieved in degrees, for example by applying certain methods and ways of thinking, thereby creating distance to the object of analysis when interpreting the collected pieces of information.³⁶ Analytical objectivity surfaces as a norm in various ways in intelligence literature, for example in the following quote from Dr Kerr: ‘The task of the Intelligence Community is to produce objective, ground truth analysis’.³⁷ A similar message is found in the UK Ministry of Defence’s *Joint Doctrine Publication* above, and below in the Norwegian Police’s *Doctrine of Intelligence* [my translation]:

It is important to distinguish between the information obtained and the analyst’s own assessments. The analyst’s assessments are influenced by many factors, such as for example background, experiences and professional prerequisites. To overcome this and ensure the greatest possible degree of objectivity and validity, social-scientific methods should be used.³⁸

Here, objectivity is expressed by appealing to its opposite, such as the analysis being influenced by personal values and experiences. In this context, analytical objectivity is understood as a matter of degree, and the highest degree of objectivity seems to be obtained in cases in which the influence from personal values, etc., can be minimised. The Norwegian Police’s *Doctrine of Intelligence* recommends applying social-scientific methods to overcome the influence of personal values on analytical intelligence acquisition. Interestingly, these social-scientific methods are not further specified – and in an omission that begs even more questions, no specific position within the philosophy/theory of science is stipulated.

In her thoughtful article ‘The Irreducible Complexity of Objectivity’, Heather Douglas fleshes out various ways in which objectivity is articulated and understood in the scientific domain. Her analytical distinctions of

objectivity are very helpful when differentiating between the concepts of the objectivity norm in the context of intelligence analysis. Thus, Douglas provides a framework that encapsulates some of the various ways in which objectivity is perceived and practiced, which is in line with the scope of this article. For example, she distinguishes between *value-free objectivity*, *value-neutral objectivity* and *objectivity as detachment*.³⁹ Below, will scrutinise how these three distinctions are also present in intelligence practices, and how objectivity in intelligence practices differs from the distinctions from the scientific domain.

Analytical Objectivity as Value-Free

Douglas' first specification of the objectivity norm reflects an ideal of being *value-free*. She argues that value-free objectivity is a common ideal within science. The norm generally reflects a striving towards avoiding the influence of subjective interests on the results of knowledge-acquisition processes.⁴⁰ This ideal of value-free knowledge acquisition also appears to be a common way in which objectivity is perceived and applied in the context of intelligence analysis (as is also obvious in the above quote from the Norwegian Police's *Doctrine of Intelligence*). Objectivity as value-free therefore expresses the norm that personal values, personal experience, and the interests of the individual intelligence analyst should exert only minimal influence on the analytical product. This ideal would not contradict a parallel ideal of intelligence analysis as a creative process that requires imagination and draws on past professional experience, since the ideal of being value-free most often refers to the *output* of an analytical process. In line with this distinction between a value-free process and value-free product, Douglas further specifies that there is a profound difference between (1) allowing personal values to influence knowledge acquisition, for example when personal interests influence the results of an analysis; and (2) letting personal values influence the process of selecting a specific subject of analysis.⁴¹ Douglas argues that 'Hiding the decisions that scientists make, and the important role values should play in those decisions, does not exclude values. It merely masks them.'⁴² This distinction pertaining to being value-free is also important in the context of intelligence. Consequently, attention should be placed on how personal values can have a problematic influence on both the knowledge-acquisition process and the results of the analytical process, for example by making explicit personal and organisational preconceptions (see later).

However, it seems both unavoidable and less problematic that personal values should influence the selection of the topic and the line of enquiry.⁴³ This division sparks discussions on whether an objective analytical process will automatically lead to an objective analytical end-product or outcome of that process. In the intelligence context, objectivity of the analytical end-product and the true conclusions are often interlinked (as in Dr. Kerr's quote above). Yet an interesting question is whether *the truth* is, in fact, a feasible norm of intelligence analysis. Gregory Treverton divides the various types of intelligence analysis into three categories: intelligence as *puzzles*, as *mysteries* and as *complexities*.⁴⁴ He explains puzzles as cases of intelligence analysis in which a true and correct solution is feasible. While such tasks are not easy to solve, it is possible to arrive at a correct and true answer. In the case of mysteries and complexities, simple answers are not feasible, since they often involve the future-oriented interpretation of complex questions. Such cases are essentially complex risk assessments – leading to a conclusion that, for example, outlines possible future scenarios. An important consequence of this division is that the governing norms of intelligence analysis should be flexible enough to adapt to the type of task at hand. One cannot expect a correct and true answer in cases that are characterised by mysteries and complexities, and therefore, in the context of intelligence, questions concerning truth should be separated from questions concerning objectivity.

Marrin, too, addresses the claim that analytical objectivity means being value-free. He reaches a similar conclusion to Douglas, arguing that analytical objectivity – as a general analytical concept of being value-free – is 'not attainable'.⁴⁵ He fleshes out how, ever since Sherman Kent presented his theory of intelligence after World War II, the intelligence communities have aspired to a positivist ideal of objectivity, consisting of a general norm of aspiring to a pure and value-free acquisition of facts regarding incidents in the physical world (similar to objectivity as interpretation-free, as discussed above). The prevailing understanding of intelligence objectivity reflects exactly this norm – that the intelligence analyst should see herself in a scientist-like role, the purpose of which is to describe facts about the world that are 'out there' for value-free observation.⁴⁶ Although Kent himself calls this aim 'aspirational rather than achievable', the notion of objectivity as value-free seems to live on in intelligence communities.⁴⁷

Viewing a central attribute of intelligence analysis through these positivistic lenses, which value factual observations of the world in value-free and neutral ways, might explain why subjective interpretations and the values of the analyst are treated as second-order attributes that should be avoided or even masked in intelligence practices.⁴⁸ As a consequence, the masking of subjective influence or the ‘objectification’ of inherently subjective matters⁴⁹ means that the intelligence communities are operating on the basis of flawed and unachievable pseudo-norms of objectivity, which are in fact contradictory to and counterproductive in the practices of intelligence.

Interestingly, Richards Heuer Jr., in his pivotal book *The Psychology of Intelligence*, addresses precisely this attempt to maximise objectivity within the intelligence communities. He does not specify his understanding of objectivity (for example, as a form of value-free, detached-objectivity), but in line with Douglas, he argues that personal values, individual mindsets and personal cognitive biases inherently influence the decision-making processes of intelligence analysts (and all other human beings).⁵⁰ As such, Heuer asserts that the aim of intelligence analysis should not be to ‘mask’ (in the words of Douglas), but to embrace and render explicit the values and preconditions affecting the knowledge process. This argument is clearly stated in the following quote from *The Psychology of Intelligence*:

Analysts do not achieve objective analysis by avoiding preconceptions; that would be ignorance or self-delusion. Objectivity is achieved by making basic assumptions and reasoning as explicit as possible so that they can be challenged by others and analysts can, themselves, examine their validity.⁵¹

In Heuer’s terms, objectivity seems to be a *hermeneutic* knowledge ideal of being *value-explicit*, *self-aware* and *transparent*. The analyst’s personal values and preconceptions constitute preconditions for objective knowledge-acquisition, rather than problematic barriers to objectivity.⁵² In this sense, objectivity-as-value-free (as per Douglas’ second understanding) would, like objectivity-as-interpretation-free, constitute a flawed vision and an unachievable intelligence norm – one that is inapplicable both in the intelligence context and in similar qualitative knowledge-acquisition processes.

Analytical Objectivity as Value-Neutrality

If my analysis above holds true, objectivity-as-value-free is a flawed and unsuitable ideal in the context of intelligence analysis. Objectivity as a norm pertaining to the analytical process would better be understood as *value-illumination*, rather than value-free. The question, then, is whether analytical objectivity, understood as *value-neutrality*, is applicable in the intelligence context. Douglas specifies her second notion of objectivity as value-neutrality, understood in the sense that the investigator should not choose sides when presenting their findings, but should only describe and present ways to understand and explain a specific topic from various perspectives.⁵³ In an intelligence context, scholarly discussions on analytical objectivity, understood as value-neutrality, are probably most obvious in the extended discussions of intelligence failures and the politicisation of intelligence.⁵⁴

The ideal that intelligence analysis or intelligence advice should be value-neutral is reflected in the ‘standard model for intelligence’, which articulates the core aim of intelligence as being apolitical decision-support.⁵⁵ This norm is reflected in the following description: ‘[...] intelligence organisations provide objective assessment to decision-makers who may otherwise be (mis)guided by reliance on their own judgements’.⁵⁶ Whereas Heuer mainly describes objectivity as a norm related to the analytical process, Marrin and Phythian (and other intelligence observers) also discuss objectivity as a norm pertaining to the intelligence product – and further, as a norm denoting the ideal relationship between intelligence expertise and policy-makers.⁵⁷ As such, in the conceptualisation of objectivity as value-neutrality, the norm reflects an ideal of not favouring one interpretation of a specific situation when presenting the results of an analysis to ‘consumers’. The opposite of this understanding of objectivity would consist of choosing a side between the presented perspectives and favouring one conclusion over the others.⁵⁸

According to Richard Betts, politicisation in the context of intelligence constitutes ‘a process that fabricates or distorts information to serve policy preferences or vested interests’.⁵⁹ When presenting the analytical findings in the form of a final intelligence product, favouring one perspective over another based on evidence and sound arguments does not necessarily equal politicisation in the sense of a fabrication or distortion of the results. However, the core ideal behind the neutrality norm expresses a common ideal in the intelligence communities, namely of a sharp Weberian division of duties and mandates between analysts and

decision-makers (see the following section on objectivity-as-detachment). Gregory Treverton categorises various forms of politicisation, such as ‘direct pressure’, ‘shared mindset’ and ‘house rules’. In different ways, these represent the risks pertaining to not upholding the norm of neutrality – either consciously or unconsciously – in an intelligence context, thereby resulting in misleading intelligence products.⁶⁰

In the intelligence context, objectivity as neutrality could therefore reflect a norm pertaining to the conclusions of intelligence analysis, and to the core and commonly shared ideal that intelligence conclusions should guide decision-makers rather than vice versa.

Analytical Objectivity as Detachment

Douglas specifies *detachment* as a third variant of scientific objectivity. In her view, this norm reflects a need for appropriate distance or detachment between the analyst and the subject of the analysis: ‘Such detachment, it is hoped, will keep one from wanting a particular outcome of inquiry too much, or from fearing another outcome to such an extent that one cannot see it.’⁶¹ In this way, the norm of disinterestedness via distance is closely connected to the discussions on politicisation presented above. While the detachment of intelligence analysts from the subject of their analysis is rarely articulated as a core pitfall in intelligence analysis, it most certainly constitutes a relevant risk. A lack of detachment may be most relevant when addressing various collection disciplines, especially HUMINT, which would indeed be characterised by a close connection (of one form or another) with the subject concerned.⁶² However, as indicated in the previous section, discussions on detachment in the intelligence context mainly concern the relationship between the analyst and the policy- or decision-makers. As such, the norm of detachment is closely connected to the norm of avoiding politicisation, which is addressed by suggestions for further specifying the roles and areas of responsibility of, respectively, intelligence analysts and the consumers of these products.⁶³

Similarly, objectivity as detachment between analysts and policy-makers is reflected in a classic discussion in the intelligence literature between the Kent and the Gates schools. Sherman Kent is famous for his position in this debate, and his ‘school’ favours a separation and clear detachment between analysts (‘the knowers’) and the decision-makers (‘the doers’), as is made clear in the following quote:

Intelligence is not the formulator of objectives; it is not the drafter of policy; it is not the maker of plans; it is not the carrier out of operations. Intelligence is ancillary to these; to use the dreadful cliché, it performs a service function. Its job is to see that the doers are generally well-informed; its job is to stand behind them with the book opened at the right page, to call their attention to the stubborn fact they may be neglecting, and – at their request – to analyze alternative courses without indicating choice.⁶⁴

According to Kent, this clear division of responsibility between the various intelligence actors is pivotal in order not to ‘contaminate’ the results of the intelligence analysts with the views, preferences and opinions of decision-makers.⁶⁵ Counter to the ideal of objectivity-as-detachment expressed by the so-called Kent School, the Gates School, led by Robert Gates, claims that detachment between analysts and policy-makers leads to intelligence analysis becoming irrelevant. Gates describes Kent’s ideal as ‘too ivory-towered’.⁶⁶ He recommends close cooperation between intelligence analysts and decision-makers, and characterises this closeness ‘not as politicization but as contextualization’.⁶⁷ In his view, this contextualisation would render the actual use and application of the analytical product more likely.

The more pragmatic position adopted by the Gates School therefore suggests that engagement (as opposed to detachment) would not result in infringement of the objectivity norm. Further, Marrin describes the apolitical ideal, which exists in the domain of intelligence and is especially dominant in the Kent School, as an ‘apolitical myth’⁶⁸ that expresses a flawed and idealised notion of the core preconditions of intelligence practices, as reflected in the following quote:

This embrace of analytic objectivity [...] appears to have been drawn from idealized conceptualizations of the relationship between information, knowledge, and decision that existed in the sciences decades ago, with an emphasis on the scientific method as a kind of value-neutral epistemological framework used to develop knowledge ‘objectively’.⁶⁹

Objectivity understood as apolitical would indeed best be described as a myth or as a masking of the real practices of intelligence. However, even though intelligence might readily be viewed as inherently political, since it constitutes a part of the machinery of political power, this would not necessarily render intelligence inherently *politicised* (as per Bett’s definition of politicisation).⁷⁰ Politicised intelligence, as opposed to political intelligence, means that there is (intentionally or unintentionally) a flawed relationship between analysts and decision-makers, or that the analytical culture is characterised by, for example, shared and fixed mindsets, etc.⁷¹ As a result, it is still relevant to uphold the norm of objectivity – understood as striving to avoid

being intentionally (or unintentionally) misleading – despite the fact that intelligence is a political endeavour. This is especially the case if objectivity reflects a norm of value-neutrality, detachment or disinterestedness when presenting analytical products to policy-makers.

A recent study of the Norwegian Police addressed a common theme in discussions of the norm of objectivity-as-detachment. Ronny Moen has scrutinised various arguments concerning whether intelligence products should recommend specific actions.⁷² While making recommendations seems to be prohibited in military intelligence contexts, due to a very strict division of responsibilities between intelligence analysts ('knowers') and managers ('doers'), the situation is less clear in the context of police intelligence. Moen identifies various arguments for and against the inclusion of action recommendations, all of which boil down to the norms and ideals pertaining to the relationship vis-à-vis the analysts and decision-makers, and where the line should be drawn between the risks of irrelevance or politicisation.

The link between the intelligence analysts' objectivity and (professional) integrity – as is evident in the Norwegian *Doctrine of Intelligence* (see the quote above) – therefore seems to reflect a notion of objectivity understood as detachment between intelligence analysts and decision-/policy-makers. Neither Moen nor the *Doctrine* defines or further specifies the ideal balance and division of duties and responsibility.

Objectivity as Fairness

The final concept of objectivity is equivalent to the legal ideal of *treating citizens fairly*. This notion of objectivity, as a question of *procedural justice*, is not specifically related to the service-internal steps of the intelligence cycle discussed above. On the other hand, objectivity in this sense reflects an ideal that relates to the external relationship between the intelligence services and civil society. The military intelligence services do not interact with citizens in the same way as the police services, and objectivity as procedural justice is therefore most commonly discussed within the context of the police or domestic intelligence services, as well as criminal intelligence. This mirrors an understanding of intelligence objectivity that means *free from cognitive biases and prejudices* in interactions with citizens.⁷³

Burch and Furman specify this understanding of objectivity as being unbiased in terms of, e.g. race, in the context of professionals deciding what action should be taken regarding a citizen: ‘objectivity in his case would have averted the risks of personal bias and racial animus affecting his reasoning and decision-making’.⁷⁴ In the legal context, a process would only be considered fair if all of the relevant parties are treated fairly: ‘[...] objectivity here thus averts the risk of our practical reasoning failing to track the normative requirement of fairness that we associate with justice’.⁷⁵ Unfortunately, the fairness norm is much easier to describe in theory than to actually carry out in practice.

Objectivity as procedural justice reflects the discussions within intelligence studies regarding intelligence ethics, in which a central question is whether and to what extent intelligence services can infringe core human rights and vital welfare interests in order to obtain information that would increase national safety and security.⁷⁶ Since intelligence laws are often very vaguely and generally formulated in order to avoid the exposure of clandestine and sensitive methods, ethics play an important role in establishing guiding principles aimed at ensuring procedural justice and fairness with regard to citizens.⁷⁷ In this sense, objectivity as procedural justice reflects a commonly expressed norm concerning *proportionality* and applying *the least intrusive means* when initiating intelligence-collecting activities.⁷⁸ In this understanding of objectivity as a means of ensuring fairness, ethical considerations concerning procedural justice in intelligence actions merge with epistemological concerns regarding the risks of flawed and biased reasoning processes.⁷⁹ An awareness of the epistemic risks pertaining to both individual and collective reasoning and decision-making processes is therefore a prerequisite for objectivity-as-fairness in the intelligence context. Epistemic justice and injustice are at the core of this understanding of objectivity. Particularly in relation to the scope of this special issue focusing on specifying the philosophy of intelligence, it is notable that this concept of objectivity in the intelligence context brings together both ethical and epistemological considerations.

The Multifaceted Norm of Intelligence Objectivity

The above attempt to identify, clarify and discuss some of the various perceptions of objectivity in the intelligence context shows that intelligence-objectivity reflects more than just one unified norm. On the other hand, objectivity reflects a range of different understandings that are not reducible to one another. Some

notions are aspirational and achievable in degrees (such as objectivity as value-neutral, as detachment and as procedural justice), whereas others are less achievable or even undesirable, since they could be viewed as misleading rather than as guiding norms for intelligence practices (such as intelligence as interpretation and as value-free). The table below presents the various concepts of objectivity in order to create an overview of the multifaceted perceptions of objectivity in intelligence practices.

Table 1: Objectivity in Intelligence Practices

OBJECTIVITY AS INTERPRETATION-FREE	OBJECTIVITY AS VALUE-FREE	OBJECTIVITY AS VALUE-NEUTRALITY	OBJECTIVITY AS DETACHMENT	OBJECTIVITY AS FAIRNESS
Articulated as a norm mirroring the epistemic status of collected pieces of information/data as either raw or free from human interpretation.	Articulated as a norm of the process of intelligence analysis, understood as a striving towards reducing the personal biases, experiences and preferences of the intelligence analyst when conducting intelligence analysis.	Reflects the core norm that intelligence products should provide a neutral and apolitical decision-making framework that does not favour one perspective over another.	Reflects a norm concerning the ideal relationship between intelligence analysts and decision-makers, in which some form of distance and detachment between the types of actors is considered desirable.	Reflects the norm concerning the relationship between intelligence services and civil society, e.g. in which citizens who come under suspicion should be treated fairly and equally.

All of these forms of objectivity could be viewed as means to achieve certain ends. These ends might be legitimacy, trust, trustworthiness or fairness/procedural justice, depending on the specific concept of objectivity under discussion. Burch and Furman argue that objectivity reflects a core attempt to minimise relevant epistemic risks.⁸⁰ Even though I argue against the applicability and desirability of some of the specific notions of objectivity in the intelligence context, I agree with Burch and Furman that epistemic risk reduction is a general attribute of efforts to uphold objectivity as a norm in intelligence practices.

Therefore, as specified in the opening quote from Douglas, objectivity plays a central role when ‘deciding what to accept and what to reject’. As such, it is crucial to ‘[...] know how we are going to decide whether something is objective or not’.⁸¹ It makes a huge difference whether objectivity is articulated in terms of *interpretation-free information*, *value-*

free intelligence processes or *value-neutral analytical products*, etc. As this article has shown, objectivity can easily become a vague, catch-all norm that is applied intermittently without further specification. However, such specifications are crucial for enabling qualified discussion and the further development of intelligence theory and practices. This is exactly why philosophy in general – and epistemology, philosophy of science and ethics specifically – are important to the future of intelligence studies.⁸²

Concluding Remarks: Professionalisation via *Scientification*

Previously, objectivity has mainly been addressed as a central norm of intelligence analysis. One of this article's main contributions is a broadening of the way in which objectivity is addressed, both within and beyond intelligence analysis – including, for example, when discussing the collection and dissemination of intelligence. In all versions of intelligence objectivity, the norm reflects an aspiration to minimise *epistemic risks* in one way or another. In this sense, objectivity is not a binary concept in which intelligence is either objective or its relevant opposite. Rather, objectivity is a continuum in which a high level of objectivity is desirable. Marrin, in his analysis of analytical objectivity, does not distinguish explicitly between the various ways in which objectivity is used and applied in intelligence practices. Rather, he offers a more general criticism of the way in which objectivity as a norm is transferred blindly from the domain of science to the context of intelligence. He claims that even science has moved away from the understanding of objectivity applied in the intelligence context.⁸³ In line with Marrin, I would argue that in its initial stages, the attempt to professionalise intelligence practices has resulted in a *scientification* of intelligence, in which science and intelligence are understood as two sides of the same coin, and the norms of intelligence are considered equivalent to the norms of (positivistic) science.⁸⁴ However, this scientification is unwarranted, as it fits neither the actual practices of intelligence, nor contemporary, comprehensive perceptions of science. Furthermore, the scientification of intelligence potentially leads to flawed and unachievable ideals (such as objectivity understood as interpretation- and value-free), and risks bestowing unwarranted and exalted authority upon intelligence practices. Obviously, there might also be political pressure (from within the intelligence services themselves) to frame intelligence services as scientifically minded, independent, neutral bodies of expertise, in order to boost their legitimacy, mandate and importance.

Despite potential political incentives, the transfer of scientific norms and methods seems to be a common dynamic when hands-on professions turn towards increased professionalisation and academisation. In the intelligence context, this is obvious in the so-called art/science debate, which has occupied many scholarly discussions in the field. This dispute concerns whether intelligence analysis depends primarily on ‘subjective, intuitive judgements’ (intelligence analysis as an art) or ‘structured, systematic analytical methods’ (as a science).⁸⁵

It is beyond the remit of this article to solve this puzzle, though I agree with Folker when he asserts that it might not be constructive to claim that intelligence analysis is either/or art/science, as intelligence work is a unique discipline that resembles and draws on aspects from both domains.⁸⁶ My main claim here is that context-sensitive theories are needed in order to continuously develop a robust, future-oriented foundation for intelligence practices and studies. Similar discussions regarding appropriate interpretations of the balance between science and art, or between objectivity and subjectivity, also arise within other professions. In the medical profession, for example, the scientific norm concerning detached objectivity is similarly described as a ‘myth’ maintaining a professional norm that discredits subjective elements, such as professional experience.⁸⁷ While I specifically call for the context-sensitive conceptualisation of central intelligence norms with regard to objectivity, there might be more to gain by looking into the scholarly discussions on similar norms and ideals in other hands-on professions, such as medicine.

As Eivind Kolflaath notes, the attempt to professionalise the police detective’s *métier* has likewise resulted in a somewhat uncritical transfer of concepts and ideals from scientific fields to a crime-detection context. According to Kolflaath, this is evident in, for example the Popper-inspired desire to establish and falsify hypotheses, and the appeals to scientific reasoning styles in textbooks on investigative practices.⁸⁸ A more constructive path for the future professionalisation of intelligence practices would be to set aside this uncritical transfer of general – even outdated – norms from the scientific domain, in favour of intelligence-specific theories and conceptualisations. This observation is particularly relevant to the theme of this special issue on the philosophy of intelligence, which sets out precisely to develop intelligence-specific theories of intelligence,

and highlight how philosophy can make a valuable contribution to the future enhancement of intelligence studies.⁸⁹

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¹ Ibid.

² Marrin, "Analytical objectivity".

³ Ibid.

⁴ Hedley, "The Evolution", 25.

⁵ UK Ministry of Defence, *Understanding Intelligence*, chapter 2, p. 33.

⁶ Jervis, "Reports, politics and Intelligence Failures"; Treverton, "Intelligence analysis".

⁷ Hedley, "Learning from Intelligence Failures"; Jervis, "Reports, Politics and Intelligence Failures".

⁸ Marrin, "Analytical Objectivity".

⁹ Marrin, *Improving Intelligence Analysis*; Woodard, "Tasting the Forbidden Fruit"

¹⁰ cf. Colombo et al., "Objectivity in Science".

¹¹ Phythian (ed.), *Understanding the Intelligence Cycle*.

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- ¹² Douglas, “The Irreducible Complexity”.
- ¹³ Burch et al., “Objectivity in science and law”.
- ¹⁴ Ibid. Naturally, the identification of the target is likewise in no way a neutral and objective process, but I will focus on the latter elements of the intelligence cycle.
- ¹⁵ Räsänen and Nyce, “The Raw is Cooked”; Bruce and George, “Intelligence analysis”, 12. See also Miller in this special issue.
- ¹⁶ Phythian (ed.) *Understanding the Intelligence Cycle*.
- ¹⁷ Gitelman and Jackson, “Introduction: Raw Data is an Oxymoron”, 3.
- ¹⁸ Elgin, *True enough*, 151.
- ¹⁹ Reiss and Sprenger “Scientific Objectivity”.
- ²⁰ Räsänen and Nyce, “The Raw is Cooked”.
- ²¹ Ibid. 656.
- ²² Reiss and Sprenger “Scientific Objectivity”. See also Pili and Gaspard in this special issue.
- ²³ Kaufmann, “The Co-Construction”; Gitelman and Jackson, “Introduction: Raw Data is an Oxymoron”; Räsänen and Nyce, “The Raw is Cooked”, 655.
- ²⁴ Bowker, “Data Flakes”; Gitelman and Jackson, “Introduction: Raw Data is an Oxymoron”; Kaufmann “The co-construction of crime predictions”
- ²⁵ Räsänen and Nyce, “The Raw is Cooked”.
- ²⁶ Gundhus, “Smart Policing”.
- ²⁷ Ibid., 153.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Egbert and Leese “*Criminal Futures*”, 73.
- ³⁰ Reiss and Sprenger “Scientific Objectivity”.
- ³¹ Hestehave, “Coppers Chasing Usual Suspects”.
- ³² Katz, *Foreign Intelligence*, 18–19.
- ³³ Bowker, “Data Flakes”; Gitelman and Jackson, “Introduction: Raw Data is an Oxymoron”; Kaufmann “The co-construction of crime predictions”; Rathmell, “Towards Post-Modern Intelligence”; Tang, “How do we know?”
- ³⁴ Cross reference to Hendrickson in this special issue.
- ³⁵ Rønn, “(Mis-) Informed Decisions?”.
- ³⁶ Heuer, *The Psychology of Intelligence*; Pherson & Heuer, *Structured Analytic Techniques*.
- ³⁷ Former Principal Deputy DNI, Dr. Donald M. Kerr, 2007, quoted from *Reuters* available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-bolton-idUSL081165120071208>
- ³⁸ Norwegian Police’s Doctrine of Intelligence.
- ³⁹ Douglas, “The Irreducible Complexity”.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., 459
- ⁴¹ Ibid.
- ⁴² Ibid.
- ⁴³ In order to illustrate the distinctions pertaining to the norm of objectivity understood as value-free, imagine for example a specialist on right-wing extremism employed in a national intelligence service, who chooses to initiate an analysis on a current trend in this environment – among other things, due to their personal interests and expertise on the area – but refrains from letting their interests in the topic influence the results of the analysis, and makes both aspects explicit in their analysis. In this example, the non-value-free conduct appears unproblematic.
- ⁴⁴ Treverton, “The future of intelligence”, 30.
- ⁴⁵ Marrin, “Analytical Objectivity”, 353
- ⁴⁶ Reiss and Sprenger, “Scientific Objectivity”, 2.
- ⁴⁷ Marrin, “Analytical Objectivity”, 354.
- ⁴⁸ Gundhus, “Smart Policing”.
- ⁴⁹ Innes et al., “The Appliance of Science?”.
- ⁵⁰ Heuer, *The Psychology of Intelligence*.
- ⁵¹ Ibid., 10.
- ⁵² Gadamer, *Truth and method*.
- ⁵³ Douglas, “The Irreducible Complexity”, 460.
- ⁵⁴ Cf. Jervis, “Reports, politics and Intelligence Failures” and Treverton, “Intelligence analysis”.
- ⁵⁵ Marrin, “Analytical Objectivity”, 353.
- ⁵⁶ Phythian, “Policing uncertainty”, 199.
- ⁵⁷ Bruce and George, “Intelligence analysis”, 9
- ⁵⁸ Riste, “The Intelligence–Policy Maker Relationship”.

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- ⁵⁹ Ibid., 180.
- ⁶⁰ Treverton, “Intelligence analysis”.
- ⁶¹ Douglas, “The Irreducible Complexity”, 459.
- ⁶² Rasch-Olsen, “Politiets Bruk av Informanter”. Naturally, this kind of intelligence collection is surrounded by norms and procedures aimed at ensuring quality and validity (see, e.g. Wippl et al. ‘The Qualities That Make a Great Collection Management Officer’).
- ⁶³ Treverton, “Intelligence analysis”.
- ⁶⁴ Kent, *Strategic Intelligence*, 182, see also Davis, “Intelligence analysts and policymakers”.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶⁶ Riste, “The Intelligence–Policy Maker Relationship”.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid., 187 (Riste refers to Betts, “The New Politics of Intelligence”, when making this point).
- ⁶⁸ Marrin, “Analytical Objectivity”, 359.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid.
- ⁷⁰ Riste, “The Intelligence–Policy Maker Relationship”; Rønn, “(Mis-)Informed Decisions”.
- ⁷¹ Treverton, “Intelligence analysis”. Treverton additionally addresses ‘cherry picking’ as a type of politicisation in the context of intelligence, in which decision-makers select the conclusions that support their interests and disregard all other conclusions. In this regard, it would be interesting to discuss further whether objective intelligence processes and conclusions could be used for non-objective purposes, as pointed out by one of the anonymous reviewers.
- ⁷² Moen, “Recommendations in the police intelligence products”.
- ⁷³ Bjercknes & Fahsing, [Investigation], 82.
- ⁷⁴ Burch et al., “Objectivity in science and law”, 63.
- ⁷⁵ Ibid.
- ⁷⁶ C.f. Bellaby, “What’s the Harm?”; Omand and Phythian, *Principled spying*; Rønn, “Intelligence Ethics”. See also Bellaby in this special issue.
- ⁷⁷ Born & Wills, “Beyond the Oxymoron”.
- ⁷⁸ Bellaby, “What’s the harm?”; Rønn and Lippert, “Out of Proportions?”.
- ⁷⁹ Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*
- ⁸⁰ Marrin, “Analytical Objectivity”
- ⁸¹ Douglas, “The Irreducible Complexity”, 454.
- ⁸² Cross reference to Pili and Gaspard in this special issue.
- ⁸³ Marrin, “Analytical Objectivity”, 359.
- ⁸⁴ This is particularly evident in the initial work of Sherman Kent, who equates intelligence analysts with detached, scientific experts. See also Jakobsen et al. 2018 for an interesting discussion on the tendency to rely on and apply concepts from ‘hard sciences’ when articulating and professionalising the crime-detection profession.
- ⁸⁵ Marrin, *Improving Intelligence Analysis*, 37.
- ⁸⁶ Folker, *Intelligence Analysis*.
- ⁸⁷ Wilson, “The myth of objectivity”
- ⁸⁸ Kolflaath, “[On the Scientification of detective’s work]”.
- ⁸⁹ Cross reference to Pili and Gaspard in this special issue.