Being objective

The idea of scientists as impartial observers is hard to shake, but is complete detachment justified?

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What does it mean to be objective? John B. Watson, the founding father of behaviourism, had no doubts about this. For him, the word meant simply 'avoiding emotion'. Thus, in giving advice about parental behaviour, he wrote:

"There is a sensible way of treating children. Treat them as though they were young adults... Let your behaviour always be objective and kindly firm. Never hug and kiss them, never let them sit on your lap. If you must, kiss them once on the forehead when they say good night. Shake hands with them in the morning..." (*Psychological Care of Infant and Child* 9–10; W. W. Norton, New York, 1928).

As he knew that parents were prone to make this kind of mistake, he had grave doubts about whether they should be allowed to bring up their children at all, or indeed to have anything to do with them. "There are," he noted, "undoubtedly more scientific ways of bringing up children, which probably mean finer and happier children."

Here, as often happens, the notion of *objectivity* seems to be closely linked to that of *science*. But just what does 'scientific' mean here? It does not mean that these new methods had been scientifically proved to have this better effect, for they had not. Watson seems to mean by it something more like 'ways that avoid emotion, as a scientist may be expected to do when he (repeat he) is investigating something inanimate'. By objectivity, similarly, he means treating what one has to deal with as a lifeless object, not as a subject.

But can this precaution always be observed when that item is in fact alive, and may even be human? This question has worried many theorists. Some have dealt with it in heroic style, by ruling that life itself is actually an illusion. Thus Peter Atkins: "Inanimate things are innately simple. That is one more step along the path to the view that animate things, being innately inanimate, are innately simple too." (*The Creation* 113; W. H. Freeman, New York, 1987.) Similarly, Jacques Monod laid down his 'postulate of objectivity' — the assumption that no such thing as purpose is to be found anywhere in nature — and considered it "consubstantial with science", a universal law because, as he rather oddly put it, "Nature is objective" (*Chance and Necessity* 30, 54; Collins, Glasgow, 1972).

Now Monod, being a molecular biolo-

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gist, never had to consider whether this law actually extended to cover everything in nature, including active organisms such as small children. And again — as he too was part of nature — was his own purpose in writing his books real or not? He doesn't say. He took all purpose to be illusory and the difference between living and lifeless matter, sentience and unconsciousness, to be somehow a trivial one, beneath the notice of science. For this strange metaphysical view he claimed the authority of Galileo, as Galileo had excluded purpose from physics. But physics, as we know, is not the whole of science. It never has to deal with living subjects.

This strange notion of objectivity does not follow from the ordinary use of the word, which is simply *fair, unbiased, impartial*. In that sense, the objective way to tackle a question — for instance, whether it is good for small children to be hugged — is to try to find out the answer by studying the children themselves rather than by simply expressing one's own emotional response to this phenomenon, which is what Watson clearly did.

Life, consciousness and purpose are natural facts in the world like any others, and in some contexts they are vitally important facts. That is why we have to take subjectivity seriously. But the idea that our scientific duty is to treat everything we study as an inanimate object has been strangely persistent, long surviving the behaviourist ideology out of which it grew. When Jane Goodall first submitted an article about chimpanzees to *Nature*, the editor crossed out the words 'he' and 'she' where they were applied to the apes and replaced them by 'it'. Similarly, her use of names rather than numbers for the animals caused alarm, although psychologists dealing with human beings had established before this that using names was a much more efficient method for observing people than using numbers.

Is this greater complexity in living sub-

Lessons in objectivity: should parents, or even scientists, always be objective?

jects somehow damaging to the kind of objectivity that matters? Certainly it is harder to be impartial in studying children than it is in studying rocks. But we have to deal with this difficulty by watching for the obvious sources of bias, not by suppressing our natural responses altogether. Someone who sees children merely as unconscious physical objects is not going to be able to observe them very intelligently.

It is interesting here to note the impressive advances in primatology that have been made by Jane Goodall and the crowd of distinguished women scientists who have followed her — Dian Fossey, Birute Galdikas, Sarah Hrdy, Sue Savage-Rumbaugh and the rest. Although they are thoroughly rigorous in their methods, what has drawn these people to this particular study is their deep sympathy and respect for the animals that they investigate. That sympathy and that respect lie at the core of their science, as well as fuelling their strong efforts to save these species from extinction. A watsonian fear of emotion that ignores such motives overlooks something central to the scientific spirit. ■

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