

Introduction

Give me my coffee so that I can make phenomenology out of it.

—Edmund Husserl (Bakewell 2016, 40)

In my travels to many countries, I am fond of asking people, “Who is in favor of objectivity?” Invariably, all hands will be raised, and this is so regardless of the continent, culture, ages, or professions. But if I should follow up the question with a second query, “Who can tell me what objectivity is?” no hands remain in the air. This is the situation of humanity in the 21st century. Objectivity has become an epistemic virtue even while people are not entirely sure what it is.

What is objectivity, really? I have spent much of the last decade pursuing an answer to this question. This extended monograph is an attempt to identify, describe, and specify just what objectivity is within the ordinary work practices of professional coffee tasters. Here the question of objectivity is pursued not as a theoretical problem or as a philosophical quandary (that has been done) but as a question for sociological inquiry. Like a modern-day Diogenes, I and my video camera have been on the hunt for the ordinary practices of people who with much diligence strive to be objective in their worldly work. I discovered many practices that serve objective knowledge. Here I investigate how these practices function, how they assist the discovery of the truth of affairs, and also how they occasionally occlude the truth of those affairs. Being human is no simple matter, and we have more evolving to do before we will possess a sapience that is worthy of our name, *Homo sapiens*. My studies led me to conclude that we are not quite human yet, but it remains a good idea.

These investigations are carried out with an ambition similar to that which motivated the contributions to the sociology of culture of Georg Simmel in *The Philosophy of Money*, Walter Benjamin in *The Arcades Project*, Theodor Adorno's inquiries into art and astrology in popular culture, and Harold Garfinkel's studies of social order in queues, games with rules, etc. These projects involved a search for a totality of meaning based upon painstaking description of the local details of mundane social forms. Because worldly practices normally exceed our theoretical idealizations, insight can be gained from studying the details of actual worldly practices. The painstaking discipline that each of these social scientists employed was an obsession, and a problem that they confronted was that they supplied too many details for the patience of many readers; however, locating and interrogating the local details of social practices, no matter how many details there are, remains the burden of rigorous sociological research. Fortunately for us, most readers seem ready to learn details about coffee.

The Study of Objectivity

The focus of this study is to discover what are the vital questions regarding objective and scientific inquiry as matters that are naturally part of the course of affairs for specialists who work actively in the worldwide coffee industry. This is basic research in the sociology of science: how is reliable knowledge organized, how can humans organize knowledge better, and how can the ways that they organize knowledge help them to deepen their understanding of matters? In the case of coffee tasting, we have a crucible that is suitable for investigating what objectivity really is.

Why coffee tasting? For the excellent reason that as a practical matter, the coffee industry requires objectivity and so pursues it painstakingly. A firm in Trieste, for instance, may have thousands of clients who have come to expect a unique flavor from the coffee that the firm provides them regularly. The flavor of this coffee depends on finding, processing, grading, purchasing, roasting, blending, and preparing coffee whose beans bear that identifying taste or blend of tastes, and the parties who staff all of these activities need to understand the flavors that are being sought; they also need to share among themselves their understandings of those flavors. Accordingly, the need to know flavors in an objective way is pertinent to the success of the coffee industry, and this makes coffee tasting a perspicuous case of objectivity in the world. Because hundreds of thousands of dollars are at stake whenever a

firm's representatives in Brazil seek to purchase particular flavors, they must have already identified and described those tastes in a way that will allow the firm and the firm's associates in Brazil to succeed in locating those very same flavors. The firm's financial stake in reliably providing to their clients that same flavor of coffee compels the firm to employ objectivity in their work, work that consists of methods for identifying and describing the tastes of coffees in objective ways, even though everyone knows that gustatory experience is something that is abidingly subjective.

This situation compelled me to travel abroad in search of answers and discoveries. From Trieste, I went to Brazil with references in hand, and I spent two months in Santos, the first city of coffee, where I lived with a number of Brazil's most renowned coffee tasters and where I was able to videotape their work, participate in tasting, and observe the labors of storied coffee exporters. In search of the practices of tasters who concentrate upon specialty coffee, I went to Panama to explore the worlds of Gesha coffee and to participate in a Best of Panama tasting in Boquete, and I flew to Columbia in search of the flavor of the newly popular Huila single-origin, where I was hosted by the Federación Nacional de Cafeteros on a tour of Huila coffee farms (*fincas*) and coffee tasters. Needing to focus more closely upon the finer details of the work of professional coffee tasters, I attended Cup of Excellence competitions in El Salvador and Nicaragua, visited *fincas* in Costa Rica and India, tasted alongside coffee processors and exporters (governmental and private; tasters who examine for defects and tasters who taste for specialty grades), and met with many local coffee processors, *cafeteros*, and expert tasters. I took formal courses in Q-grading Arabica coffee and R-grading Robusta coffee from two of the world's most knowledgeable coffee tasters (Willem Boot and Manuel Diaz, respectively), who also became my friends. After discovering how very dissimilar coffee the beverage was across the world, I spent time touring the world's cafés; in addition to the roasters and cafés of Italy and the USA, I toured the cafés of Argentina, Canada, China, France, and Sweden. I tasted coffee alongside coffee quality examiners working at Italy's ports as well as alongside leading importers in Denmark and the USA. After an entire decade of field research, and with no diminishment in enthusiasm, this project in the sociology of objectivity had involved research in more than a dozen countries.

A question that many doctoral students taking my graduate seminars on field research methods often pose to me is "How do I know when I have completed enough field study and can begin to write?" Every social researcher must decide when they have learned enough to start writing the

monograph. My answer has always been the same: when the data becomes repetitive and predictable, and one is beginning to grow bored with the repetition, then one has completed enough field research. The present project has had to confront a problem that is unique during the many field studies I have pursued in the course of my career: coffee tasting has not yet become boring, and somehow, I am unable to reach the end of my inquiries. But I face an additional problem: long ago, before I began this study, I committed myself to other important research projects in philosophical anthropology, which is why it was my original intention to devote only two or three years to this project. After much travel and field study, I discovered there was *always* much more to explore about coffee. Accordingly, this research persisted past the five-year mark, past the seven-year mark, and finally past a decade of study and inquiries. Therefore, I face a practical problem: I have become too old. At the time of this writing I am 73, and I have grown fearful that if I continue the present study until the data finally becomes repetitive (if it ever does), I will run out of years, and the other research projects to which I am committed will suffer; consequently, I decided to cut off this study of objectivity in the world of coffee. Despite this premature cessation, I still have a great many discoveries to report.

The coffee industry is suited perfectly for the problem of what it is to know objectively. For an illustration, let us consider Nespresso, the MOMA boutique of coffee capsules, which purveys a capsule of Mysore coffee that it calls “Indriya” (the Sanskrit word for “senses”). As one who has lived in Mysore District for four years, I can verify the authenticity of their capsule as a faithful representative of the typical peanut-husk flavor of Mysore coffees. Just how are they able to reproduce capsules that bear this identical flavor from one year to the next, even five years later? I will never know for certain what social practices Nestlé’s tasters use to produce that kind of objective result, for the reason that when my colleague Prof. Giole Fele and I arrived at the gates of the Nespresso factory in Fribourg, Switzerland, with a recommendation from my cousin, who was one of the Geneva-based Walter Matter, Inc., coffee brokers that Nespresso relied upon regularly, we were refused entry. This was not the first time that a coffee firm has refused to allow sociologists on their premises; fortunately, most of the coffee industry was more welcoming than Nespresso was, and so this study is rich with many details of the tasting practices professional tasters use. For coffee purveyors, objectivity is nothing theoretical—they need to provide their clients with the flavors that their clients expect. As one European importer explained to me, “We usually buy in a certain flavor spectrum.” While the qualifier

“spectrum” offers some scope for error, most coffee purveyors know what they are purchasing and know what they are selling. The question I have been pursuing is a simple one: how do they know what they know?

The aim of a coffee purveyor is not only to offer coffee that tastes good; the tastes they provide need to be reproducible—otherwise, a faithful clientele cannot be cultivated. There are consumers who may explain their favorite coffee this way: “I like Folgers because it always has the right taste.” But what are the practices by which Folgers provides that same taste? Folgers uses as many as 44 different beans to produce its blend of coffee, and each of those beans has a flavor that contributes to the taste profile of the blend. Beans bearing those flavors must be identified and repurchased from one harvest to the next. A diligent professional taster will want the tastes that are identified to be known objectively, so that they will be available to every drinker—there, in the cup. A maxim that coffee tasters use frequently is “Let the coffee speak for itself,” but even the most committed positivist must acknowledge that coffee doesn’t speak—people do. Nevertheless, more than one professional taster has suggested, “Our job as tasters is to be as objective as possible in defining the attributes that characterize the coffee we’re tasting.” But this begs the question, what is objectivity?

What makes the study of coffee especially interesting is that coffee purveyors cannot always be supplied with or use the same quantities of geographically specified beans each year, because coffee is a living plant whose “beans” (actually, the seeds of cherries) can vary in flavor from one year to the next, depending upon sunshine, rainfall, fertilization, diseases, humidity, fermentations, etc. Not only will the flavors vary, it is common for a few of Folger’s 44 beans to be unavailable altogether due to crop failure. The coffee purveyor must continually seek alternative ways to reproduce that “same flavor,” often improvising. One of the reasons Folger’s uses 44 beans is that if some of them are unavailable, substitutions will be less noticeable to a consumer. As one importer told me, “You can’t use the same strategy every year” in achieving that same flavor. So how do coffee tasters identify and achieve that flavor? The question is even more rich: how do growers, processors, graders, exporters, purchasers, roasters, blenders, and baristas identify that “same” flavor and communicate it along the chain of coffee production? The question is a sociological one—how does subjective knowledge become universal, serviceable across the global scope of coffee production?

The sociologist Alfred Schutz addressed what he calls the riddle of subjective objectivity. Just what is this relation of the subjective to the objective? Is objectivity that from which all subjectivity is removed? Does such an

objectivity even exist? And if it did, would there be anyone to acknowledge it? This riddle has propelled social phenomenologists to study the work of persons who collaborate in producing the mundane objectivities that are essential for organizing our lives. Following in their footsteps, sociologists who specialize in “ethnomethodological” inquiry have taken up the task of studying the real work of parties who are engaged in one or another routine production of objective knowledge, and these ethnomethodologists have submitted the mundane details of this local work to close scrutiny. The present monograph examines the real work of measuring scientifically the many features of the taste of coffee, of manipulating taste descriptors and scoring, and the hermeneutic challenges involved in bringing the tasters’ tongues to confront directly, discover, and explore the tastes of what is “in the cup.”

The Occasioned Character of Coffee Drinking

With my attention focused closely on taste in this way, and scrupulously following the empirical demands of each occasion, I was surprised to discover during the course of my research that most ordinary drinkers of coffee are less focused on taste than I had assumed. And this was true in every country. To my surprise, coffee is more than a taste, it is a social reality. This is a discovery with important consequences. Coffee drinking is always situated, and the occasioned contingencies of drinking can affect what is tasted or not tasted. Take for instance this comment by a lay drinker of coffee, collected during one of the consumer studies undertaken by my colleague Giolo Fele in Rovereto, Italy. Attempting to describe the flavor of some coffee, the lay drinker said (the translation is mine), “That is a coffee that will eventually make you say ‘Yes, that’s good, that’s fine.’ It is, and then one can go to class.” How does a taste that is situated inside a person’s daily life in a way like this relate with the ideal taste that exists under a professional taster’s microscopic analysis—and how do professional tastes relate to the tastes of our mundane lives? Once we become strictly empirical, the problems that surround taste multiply rapidly, and one of these other problems is that sometimes consumers of coffee have better things to do than to pay attention to the flavors of the coffee they are drinking.

The philosopher of tasting practices and Vice-Chancellor of the Slow Food Movement’s University of Gastronomical Sciences in Bra, Italy, Nicola Perullo, makes a distinction between “naked taste” and “dressed taste” (2016, 79), that is, taste directly experienced by a drinker with an open mind who

seeks only *il piacere nudo* (immanent, naked pleasure) (Perullo 2016, 67) and the taste of a person, lay or expert, who addresses wine (or coffee) with many preconceptions about its *cru*, origin, notoriety, rating, description, etc. The distinction is suggestive for our inquiries, except we need to acknowledge the fact that all taste is dressed. In seeking naked taste, Perullo (who was a student of Derrida) has identified an aspiration that is as elusive and indispensable as democracy or justice. A coffee firm's taster, a casual drinker, and a sensory scientist all have cultivated some orientation that they inevitably project upon whatever liquid is making contact with their tongues. But Perullo's distinction is useful for reminding us that one of the goals of human sapience regarding coffee is to establish direct contact with the coffee's naked taste, to learn about that taste without being closed-minded. As I discovered, this effort requires a good deal of work, work that includes not only knowing more but sometimes, as Socrates suggested, knowing less. Taste is so many things. As was written on the wall of a specialty café in San Salvador, "Una taza de café está llena de ideas" (A cup of coffee is full of ideas). Taste is endless.

Ethnomethodology's rigor involves respecting things the way they occur *in situ*, and ethnomethodologists remain attuned to the way occurrences are lived through in, and as, the occasions in which they are found, in the very way they are found there. Defined simply, ethnomethodology is the study of the local organization of naturally occurring ordinary activities, and its scientific obligation is to respect the occasioned character of each situation, without idealizing the occasion or subsuming it under the auspices of predefined academic categories before it is adequately understood. Ethnomethodology begins with the looks of the world and gives priority to the world in the way it is lived, a methodological commitment that has drawn the accusation that ethnomethodology is a variety of empiricism. Ethnomethodological investigators study how people *really* do the things that they do in their mundane lives. They have studied the astronomical discovery of an optical pulsar not as it was presented in the formal report published in a scientific journal but as it was actually lived through (and audio recorded) in real time, with none of the messiness swept under the rug (Garfinkel, et al. 1981; Hoeppe 2012). They have studied how chemists undertake their experiments, with all of the necessary bricolage exposed (Lynch 1985; Livingston 2008, 153–156). And they have studied how the ways that designers of photocopying machines intended their machines to work differ from how people who photocopy actually use them (Suchman 1987). Here we examine the work of professional tasters in determining the actual flavors of cups of coffee. Just how do they

reach a scoring of “92.27,” the highest rated coffee (100-point scale) of the El Salvador Cup of Excellence competition that I observed, and what does this rating mean across the world of specialty coffee? Just how did they identify its flavor characteristics to be “florals, apricot, peach, honey, mango, Bourdeaux wine, complex, structured, transparent, and savory,” and how does each of those taste descriptors achieve its sense, and what efficacy do such descriptors offer? Science always depends upon local details.

In the course of pursuing details, I came across many “curious incongruities” (Garfinkel 2002, 122) between the requirements of the formal methods of professional tasting and their actual, situated deployment. Edmund Husserl (1970a, 131) has discussed the “troublesome difficulties” that modern science must face continually, and he suggested that “the paradoxical interrelations of the ‘objectively true world’ and the ‘life-world’ make enigmatic the manner of being of both.” This enigmatic being is basic to our naturally occurring lives, every day and all day long. A sober examination of the work of sensory scientists will bring us face-to-face with this unavoidable enigmatic being. As Husserl (1970a, 131–32) sagely suggests, “In our attempts to attain clarity we shall suddenly become aware, in the fact of emerging paradoxes.”

Here are a few of the paradoxes I discovered:

1. Part of the identity of sensory science is to be objective, but its data concerns one of the most subjective things in the world, taste experience. While the coffee industry has developed diverse methods and protocols for tasting coffee objectively, all gustatory experience remains subjective. Nevertheless, subjective tasting must *be made* objective in order for that knowledge to be useful and accurate, and for it to be communicated to other people. It can be said that here objectivity is a necessary impossibility. This is perhaps the principal irony, the underlying tension that inhabits the world’s coffee industry. The reason that objectivity is necessary is that the flavors that coffee purveyors sell to their consumers must be provided in a reliably consistent way from one year to the next. They must procure the correct green coffee beans with the right flavors, and also roast them in the right way, and for this objective science is needed. Professional tasters must maintain the objective sense of the taste descriptors that they use, so that these descriptors can serve as tools for assessment and exploration of the taste of a coffee. If they do not work

at maintaining the objective character of these descriptors, there will be no objective knowledge. *Making tastes objective* is local work, and this entails that objectivity depend upon a variety of subjective practices that this local work comprises. This leads to the question, how is it that something objective is composed of subjective practices?

2. Many tasters stress the importance of tasting alone and silently, in order to limit the influence of others. Sensory scientists often taste in sterile booths that are painted white, with partitions that separate the tasters. Some tasters believe that this increases the objectivity of the assessment. At other times tasters have explained to me that really learning and discovering tastes is necessarily a collaborative activity, since frequently there is more to taste than one person is able to identify. The renowned coffee taster Franco Schillani of Trieste told me, “You always need some help from the other tasters,” and it is an established practice in the labs of every coffee firm I studied in a dozen countries to use two or three tasters at a time, principally to maximize the tongues present for detecting defects and errors. Coffee tasters are always eager to learn from each other what more there is to taste in a cup of coffee, and their curiosity in this regard has no bounds. Collaborative tasting can be useful for discovering this “what more,” and also for rigorous identification of positive taste attributes. If coffee is to be judged fairly, one must judge it alone; but if it is to be judged comprehensively and if one really wants to know its taste, the tasting must be done in a collaborative way.
3. Strategies of numeration are helpful, and it is important to understand just how they are helpful. Numeration supports both personal and institutional memory. However, merely converting experience into numbers and then comparing numbers is insufficient for determining flavor objectively. A respected taster from Italy advised, “All the people need to know perfectly what the numbers mean,” which implies that there is an intersubjective component that is necessarily present. How does this intersubjective situation contribute to and/or detract from the accomplishment of objectivity? Moreover, the word “perfectly” employed by our Italian taster, like similar

words used in most formal accounts of numeration methods in the coffee industry, is both a commendation of formal rigor and a prayer. A corollary irony here is that those who use numeration strategies simultaneously employ more intuitive and qualitative measures as they do so, which is necessary for rendering the numeration strategies pertinent, while those who refuse to rely on numeration protocols almost always employ some quantitative methods in their work.

4. A final irony (this list could be extended) involves how taste descriptors are used to locate the taste in a cup even as these same descriptors keep getting in the way of the tasting. This is a phenomenological question. How can one tame the semiotics of these taste descriptors so that they can be employed in a reliable manner while simultaneously affording the taster some capacity for being flexible in assessing one's self-experience, which requires the degree of openness that is necessary for keeping one's mind clear for the next cup? The work of professional tasters very much depends on keeping one's mind clear, and yet the many tools of professional tasting and sensory science keep cluttering up the tasters' minds. The acute difficulty here, the one that pervades human enterprise, is that those habits of thinking that one must continuously transcend in order to learn what one needs to discover are the very same habits of thinking that constitute professional knowledge and give experts their expertise. It seems that the tools of objective science also require some hermeneutic skills if experts are to ascertain trustworthy knowledge about taste.

Professional tasters are familiar with these ironies, which inhabit every occasion of tasting coffee. In fact, they are what makes coffee tasting interesting, and they contribute to the humility acquired by most of the coffee tasters I have met. These ironies keep causing professional methods to fall short of being completely adequate, and this in turn makes it necessary for professional tasters to keep reexamining and continually revising their methods, without relief. This is not a bad thing; however, each tool—the rating schedules, the ways of numerating, the organization of taste descriptors, etc.—should be reexamined in the context of their being applied. This is a necessary part of science, since in this life there is zero possibility that perfection has been

secured. Moreover, the purpose of these identifications, descriptions, ratings, etc. is for communicating across the chain of coffee production, from grower to consumer, and so these tools must be continually reassessed for how adequate the communication that they make possible really is.

There are a few tasters who are in denial regarding these paradoxes, and among them are those committed to marketing one or another solution for them. One competent coffee tasting methodologist, Luigi Odello of Brescia, Italy, explained to an audience of his clients (translation mine), “We must use rigorous ‘procedure’ [in English], fully elaborated and precisely respectful of a qualitative ‘standard’ [in English] that is certain and demonstrable.” Odello relies on carefully designed quantitative protocols, full of clever devices to enhance reliability, but he recognizes that his victories must also be qualitative, and he would deny that the above stated paradoxes create any paralysis for sensory analysis. Instead, in the face of the unavoidable indeterminacies of tasting, he commends certainty; certainty is the default state of many who aspire to be scientific. Italians are not the only non-English speakers who use English terms when they wish to enhance the authority of their knowledge (“procedure,” “standard”); I have observed that it is habit of coffee professionals throughout the world (India, El Salvador, Brazil, etc.), especially those who identify themselves as scientists. In her doctoral dissertation, “Tasting in Mundane Practices,” Anna Mann (2015, 131–132) undertook ethnographic investigations of mundane “sensory engagements of food and drinks” among Germans, Swiss, Dutch, and other Western Europeans in a variety of ordinary settings, but “sensory science laboratories turned out to be the only site” where the English word “taste” was used consistently, as if the idea carried a more objective sense in English than its equivalents do in German, French or Dutch. As Erving Goffman (1959) proposed, ordinary life involves a certain amount of theater, and around the world English is used to signal that one is aiming to be scientific; nevertheless, the ironies I listed are not so easily evaded.

The Best of Both Worlds

Illy Coffee, perhaps Italy’s most respected purveyor of coffee, inscribes its motto on its packaging: “Arte e scienza dell’espresso” (Art and science of espresso). It seems that Illy wants the best of both worlds. Can the coffee industry possess both art *and* science? Similarly, Franco Schillani of Trieste declared to me, “I only do objective tasting. I am seeking the maximum

objective expression of subjectivity.” Luigi Odello explained the identical aim to his Italian students: “We utilize these ‘instruments’ [in English] for the purpose of objectifying as much as possible what is producing pleasure. Our mission will always be to give an objective assessment of the sensory characteristics.” Professional tasters want it both ways because they require it both ways, and this is the problem that motivates these inquiries.

It is interesting that coffee tasters simultaneously sustain some objectivist ideology—“I always let the scores speak”—while they continue to value the contributions of subjective intelligence—“There is a necessity for the scale, but personally I place more trust in the qualitative description that tasters write in the ‘Notes’ section” and “Our way of tasting in India is not with numbers.” Odello posed our question by asking, “What is the center of the objectivity of sensorial analysis?” This center is elusive. In the context of this research, it is not an abstract philosophical question; it is a practical problem for the coffee industry, a daily problem, even though it concerns epistemological phenomena that comprise a central conundrum for humanity.

A team of scientists working on coffee tasting in Copenhagen came to a similar conclusion, albeit without the irony. Giacalone et al. (2016) write, “Food quality is a multi-dimensional concept comprising both objective and subjective components.” Are these components really separate? The phenomenologist William Earle (1955, 68) has observed that objectivity is a situation where one’s personal feelings are held in abeyance: “The more a mind is filled with feelings, the less it apprehends any other object. . . . The objective world, or the world which must appear in order to be known, vanishes in proportion to the intensity of the feeling.” How does Odello assess the pleasure of coffee, or make contact with the “naked pleasure” of which Perullo speaks, and still retain his objectivity? Here the embarrassing irony of professional coffee tasting raises its head once more: a professional taster needs to assess the pleasure of what is being tasted, but making contact with pleasure is a feeling, which can place the objectivity of the sensory assessment at risk.

During an early stage of this research, Giolo Fele of Trento and I submitted a bi-national application to the US National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) that would have financed the field studies for this research. Although we received mostly positive reviews, one reviewer disapproved strongly, and so our application was not rated highly enough to receive funding in a “Great Recession” year in which only five projects were funded. The reviewer strongly objected to my assertion that objectivity was “a necessary impossibility” for the coffee industry, suggesting that such a statement was not logical. It seems that some of those who dispense research funds do not

appreciate irony, even when it is a ubiquitous aspect of the human condition. But I did not invent the irony nor the situation that necessitates it, I only wish to study it. As Heidegger (1991, 18) discerned, “Contradiction is the inner life of the reality of the real.” Still, reflection attempts to conceal from itself its own self-contradictions (Hegel 1969, 94), not recognizing that each contradiction possesses extraordinary capacity to elucidate our situation. Coffee tasting is an ideal site for investigating the reality of how subjectivity and objectivity are related.

Most people in the coffee industry immediately recognized the pertinence of our research topic. During our first field trip to Trieste, Giolo Fele and I visited Sandalj Coffee for the purpose of videotaping the work of their chief tasters. Our first task was to secure permission from the owner, Vincenzo Sandalj, to carry out research in his firm’s tasting lab. When we explained how we were sociologists attempting to study how the world practices being objective, he recognized the problem to be an important one. But he quizzed us: “Your problem exists almost everywhere in society, you don’t need to study coffee to investigate it.” I replied by agreeing with him, “Yes, that is true, and previously I have completed other studies.” “Which studies are those?” Mr. Sandalj asked me. I replied, “I completed a detailed study of how Tibetan philosopher-monks rely on formal logic in their public debates. These problems of formal logic are especially interesting in the context of coffee tasting.” Mr. Sandalj, who happened to have an interest in Tibetan Buddhism, smiled and replied, “Yes, I can see that. Tibetan Buddhism is almost as interesting as coffee tasting.” And so our study of the necessary impossibility of objectivity in tasting coffee began in Sandalj’s tasting lab.

A Few Misconceptions

The NEH panel member who disapproved of our research design argued that if we wanted to develop a critique of objectivity we were loading the dice in our favor by selecting the most subjective of all experiences—taste and smell—to demonstrate the impossibility of being objective. The reviewer wrote, “The focal case here, coffee tastes, is inherently subjective, so undertaking a study of a subjectively based assessment to determine if objectivity exists seems a bit pointless.” Unfortunately for us, the reviewer misjudged the target of our research. The aim, quite the opposite, is to identify and describe how—just how, and with what methods—subjectivity can be made objective, that is, how objectivity can be achieved successfully, even in the

context of one of the most subjective situations one can imagine. Moreover, the situation of the taste of coffee does not differ all that greatly from any other human enterprise, since understanding, language, consciousness, social cooperation—in short, human subjectivity—will always be involved.

It is a widespread commonsense notion that there is a difference between facts and interpretations; however, there exist only interpreted facts. There is no duality here, or as Nietzsche said (Figal 2010, 51), “There are simply not facts, only interpretations.” If there is a difference, it is only because social procedures have been organized to establish and maintain a difference. The paradoxes of human understanding and inquiry I am describing are inescapable. Harold Garfinkel used to say that despite the endless remedies people develop, the paradoxes are “without remedy.” Apart from submitting our thinking and experience to one or another mythical version of experience, we must live with these ironies. And so we do.

The reviewer’s misunderstanding can be instructive for the reader here. Our interest is not to debunk objective protocols, but to learn wherein lies their utility. How do we use these methods and protocols to get on with our worldly projects? We are interested in truth, but truth is not simply the mechanistic result of a method, as Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975) has established. Truth cannot be reduced to truth-habits. Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison (2010, 58) contend that “Truth comes before and remains distinct from objectivity.” It requires insight into *the inherent problems with knowing anything*, including how the object that is grasped is necessarily formulated by the fore-structure of one’s understanding (Heidegger 1982, 139–148). For this reason, along with “straightforward” inquiry, scientific investigation must include “radical self-understanding” (Husserl 1969a, 153). If our strategies for achieving objective understanding bear flaws, then we must depend on dialectics to ensure that our understanding, including the knowledge developed by science, improves. Dialectics entails continuous criticism, negation of received doctrines and established truth-habits, cooperation and contestation. Dialectics is the means by which understanding evolves. Science is not a pure land where we are finally able to rest secure, confident of our truths. The intention of this monograph is to advance science by understanding some details about how objective understanding works. Its aim is a positive one, but here we come upon another paradox: this positive advance ascends on the shoulders of many negations.

The reputation of sociology in the world is that of a discipline of thought that is quick to debunk accepted beliefs and received notions. But this is only how it appears from the outside, usually to those who have fully

committed themselves in advance to their local interests. Social science has no investment in debunking anything; however, it does subject accepted beliefs and notions to rigorous scrutiny, in order to describe objectively just how those beliefs came to be. As Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966, 12) wrote, “The task of the sociology of knowledge is not to be the debunking or uncovering of socially produced distortions, but the systematic study of the social conditions of knowledge as such.” Further, the phenomenological method I employ here is especially effective for locating and setting aside bias. One of its fundamental principles is to store within “parentheses” every presupposition and “put them out of action” (Husserl 1982, 59), in order to witness the world “just as it shows itself from itself” (Heidegger 1996, 30). Since phenomenology has been investigating objectivity for more than a century, it is sufficiently well developed to assist us in the present study.

Another confusion surrounds the word “taste.” Originally, it was used to refer to the flavors one can experience, recognize, and appreciate; however, along with this taste-as-sense, since the 17th century (Perullo 2016, 40) there has also been a “taste” that is an indicator of status or aesthetic sensitivity; since Pierre Bourdieu, “taste” has been associated with its use by members of society as a marker of social class. Since Bourdieu’s inquiries, sociologists have had a difficult time reading the word “taste” and thinking of anything except social class markers. That is not the topic here. I am interested in taste-as-sense, what is experienced by the nose, tongue, and mouth, and how one’s understanding influences that immanent experience. Macrosocial definitions of coffees and coffee tastes do impinge on how taste-as-sense is experienced, but I am not concerned to follow up any of Bourdieu’s topics; instead, I am interested in how people taste their coffee and in how what they know about flavors influences what they taste. My curiosities are seriously microsocial.

The principal topic of this study is to gain better understanding of how the knowledge of taste is established in an objective way as the day’s work of professional coffee tasters, as the developing result of actual local processes and real procedures, through which tasters establish objective knowledge about the flavors of what they are drinking. By investigating these processes and procedures in a rigorous and ethnomethodological way, my ambition is to make a substantive contribution to basic research into the nature of objectivity in ordinary human life. Occasionally, there are subsidiary issues that will naturally engage my sociological interest. An advantage of participating in tastings as an observer and not as a participant is that one can retain a perspective broad enough to be able to notice certain dilemmas and

problems, and so one may more readily reflect upon these than if one was tasting for a commercial firm. It is possible that some of my insights may be of assistance to the work of professional coffee tasters and even improve the science that is being marshaled within the worldwide coffee industry. Although improving ordinary coffee drinkers' experience with coffee is not a motive here, it too may be an inevitable result of these inquiries. Praising coffee is not a motive either, albeit I'm always happy to do so. The central interest of these investigations is to describe in their local details the ways that people who drink coffee and undertake painstaking sensory assessment of the tastes of coffee discover, describe, and organize their understanding of the features of those tastes. My intention is to locate and describe *just what* is going on when we drink our coffee. By making a survey of these goings-on, I am concerned to learn about what is objective knowledge. Anyone who is interested in exploring the experience of understanding coffee is welcome to join.