

# Thinking Critically About the "Subjective" / "Objective" Distinction

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The words "subjective" and "objective" cause lots of confusion. Their misuse is responsible for subjectivism in ethics. Ethical subjectivism is the view that moral judgements are nothing but statements or expressions of personal opinion or feeling and thus that moral judgements cannot be supported or refuted by reason. Careless use of the terms "subjective" and "objective" also leads to odd views in metaphysics, e.g., the denial of material reality (idealism); and odd views in epistemology, e.g., the claim that all statements are equally warranted. In other words, if you're careless about how you handle the concepts of subjectivity and objectivity, you can end up saying there's no such thing as morality, reality, or truth!

The ordinary non-philosophical (i.e., oversimplified) view is that the word "subjective" is the complete opposite (negation or contradictory) of the word "objective." If something is subjective, it's not objective; if something is objective, it's not subjective. "Subjective" is thought to mean "from someone's point of view." "Objective" means "*not* just from someone's point of view." An objective matter is one that everyone (who is sane, rational, and appropriately informed) will agree about. "Subjectivity" connotes *lack* of objectivity. Ethical subjectivism is the view that since we can't be "objective" about morality, morality must be purely "subjective."

Furthermore, on the ordinary non-philosophical view, "subjective" goes with words like "belief" or "opinion." The idea is that subjective matters are not certain. "Objective," on the other hand, means "certain" or "factual." "Objective" matters are those that can be measured or quantified. For example, the answers to questions such as "How many desks are in this room?" and "What is the current temperature in this room?" would be objective. Note that these questions have precise mathematical answers, and anyone with access to the appropriate properly-working measuring devices would agree what those answers are.

In this essay, I am going to critically analyze this **ordinary oversimplified (problematic) view**, so let's recap it now:

"Subjective" (private "mental" stuff: sensations, beliefs, feelings, emotions, opinions, etc.)

is the opposite (contradictory) of

"Objective" (public "physical" stuff: publicly-observable things, events, knowledge, facts)

This oversimplified way of making the distinction leads to philosophical trouble.

Consider your experience of a headache versus your experience of the Eiffel Tower. Naturally, you have your own personal private "subjective" experience of the headache, and nobody else can have

your headache for you. So, in one of the usual (oversimplified) senses of "subjective", all headaches are subjective.

But people tend to say furthermore that "subjective" and "objective" are logical **opposites** in the strongest sense: they are negations or contradictories of each other. This means that if X is subjective, it can't be objective, and if X is objective it can't be subjective. In other words, people mistakenly think everything has to be EITHER subjective OR objective. This leads to startling consequences. You have a headache. You feel it, and nobody else does, so you say it's "subjective" (private). But look at the other notions that go with "subjective": if it's subjective, it's just your opinion. But opinions have no standing — so why should the doctor believe you when you say you have a headache? The doctor doesn't feel your headache; it's just your opinion — and you might find yourself agreeing that you can't be "objective" about your headache. And since your headache isn't objective, it isn't really REAL at all! The headache is "really" just *in your mind*. (This is the philosophy behind Christian Science.)

Now of course you could apply this very same reasoning to your experience of the Eiffel Tower. There you are in Paris, looking at the Eiffel Tower, and you think, "Gee, no one else is having this precise experience of the Eiffel Tower, so this experience of mine is just as subjective as my headache!" (And that wouldn't be wrong, of course, in a way; it's true that no one else has your precise experience of the Eiffel Tower either.)

But if all you really know is that you had a subjective experience of seeing the Eiffel Tower, and that's all anyone ever has, why say the Eiffel Tower — or *anything* — exists objectively, independently of observers? But we do (at least most of us do). We think emotions and pains are real AND we also think physical things are real. Yet if we get "philosophical" and begin thinking of *all* experience as "subjective" (not only our experience of pains and feelings but also our experiences of so-called "physical" things), we can't then be certain *anything* exists "objectively," independently of our experiences. All we know are our experiences, which are "subjective," and thus just our opinion. We've been led down the philosophical road to skepticism and perhaps even metaphysical idealism.

Metaphysical idealism is the view that there is no reality independently of people's minds — in other words, according to metaphysical idealism, so-called "physical" things don't really exist at all. Nothing exists independently of our experiences, and since our experiences are private, they count as "mental" and thus "in our minds", so nothing exists independently of our minds. (I say "our" minds, but of course, a real idealist would object to this locution, since one consequence of metaphysical idealism is the possibility that other people may exist only in my mind; i.e., there may be no other minds except mine.)

Metaphysical idealism was popular in philosophy in the early 1800's, and re-emerged in the late 20th century as deconstruction or post-modernism. Once you understand how most people oversimplify the terms "subjective" and "objective", it's not hard to understand why good-hearted people get snookered by metaphysical idealism. Here's a typical argument.

(Premise 1) All my experiences are metaphysically subjective (i.e., no one else has my unique experiences; all my experiences are from my unique point of view).

(Premise 2) "Subjective" is the opposite of "objective". If X is subjective, it can't be objective, and vice-versa.

(Premise 3) If my experiences are metaphysically subjective, then by Premise 2, any statements I make about my experiences must be epistemologically subjective — they are "merely" my beliefs, or my opinions. By Premise 2, nothing metaphysically subjective can suddenly acquire the prestige of "objectivity". For any X, if X is subjective, X stays subjective.

(Conclusion) But — hang on to your seats, now, this is the big "insight" — Premises 1 and 3 are true of everyone! Whoever you are (Mother Teresa, Einstein, Charles Manson, Hitler, Neo, Trinity, etc.), you have access only to your experiences ("your reality") and no one else's, and whatever you say, it's just your opinion ("your truth"). We simply can't be objective. There is no Objective Reality or Objective Truth. Reality and truth differ for everyone, and always will.

This argument gets a lot of support in this age of Political Correctness. If we all have only our limited points of view, nobody has THE truth. For too long now, some people have disrespected others' opinions in the name of "THE truth". But this argument shows that the "Truth Fairy" doesn't exist, and it's time all the European/male/imperialist/capitalist/Christian folks learned a little proper humility. There's nothing special about anyone's point of view; everybody's point of view is equally correct. Sound familiar?

We have a tangled web here. Let's start untangling the obviously less plausible parts of this argument.

First, metaphysical idealism seems unbelievable. It's more than a little odd to doubt the existence of a world external to your experience. When you live your life, you do seem persistently to ACT as though there is a world independent of your mind — a world you didn't make up and that you don't control. Philosophical pragmatists say (I think correctly) that you don't really believe any proposition if it has no effect on your choices. For example, if you really believed that tables and chairs didn't exist, you wouldn't walk around them. You do walk around them. So you're not really skeptical about their existence.

A lot of people might say, "Well, you can't prove metaphysical idealism is false, can you?". (These are the sort of people who think *The Matrix* has deep philosophical significance.) Arguments like that are pretty lame, though; they commit the fallacy of *appeal to ignorance*. You appeal to ignorance when your only premise in support of a claim is that you or your opponent can't show the claim is false, i.e., you are ignorant of any evidence that would disprove it. But that kind of ignorance doesn't prove anything. Think about it: I can't prove the universe didn't come into existence five minutes ago, complete with "historical" records and "memories," but the fact that I can't prove it's false doesn't make it true, or even plausible. I can't prove there isn't an invisible elephant (with no odor or any sensible properties) in my backyard. But if I seriously concluded on the basis of my ignorance of reasons for disproof that there *were* such an elephant, you would not say "Ms. LaFave, you are such a deep thinker"; you would say "Ms. LaFave, you are out of your mind".

Now let's turn to the real heart of this essay. Most people don't worry about metaphysical idealism or radical skepticism. But a lot of people worry about ethical subjectivism. Subjectivism in ethics is really just another example of the same confusion about "subjective" and "objective". The subjectivist says that because people have feelings about ethical matters, claims about ethical matters themselves must be subjective and therefore merely matters of opinion, and therefore not liable to adjudication by reason or other objective methods. In other words, nobody has "better" (more objective) views about ethical matters than anyone else.

A similar debate exists in the contemporary art world, because of the same confusion about subjectivity and objectivity. Nowadays, some people say that no work of art is better than any other. The Campbell's Soup logo is art; a pile of rocks or dog poop is art; the Aurora Borealis is art. Why? Because whether or not something is art is a "subjective" matter. Philosophers cringe.

Confusion about the subjective-objective distinction leads you to philosophical positions that are probably completely at odds with your ordinary beliefs and practices! Philosophy is supposed to clarify, enlighten, explain, etc.; the ordinary senses of "subjective" and "objective" merely confuse and mystify! Contemporary philosophers conclude that something is very wrong with the ordinary simple-minded opposition of "subjective" and "objective."

So let's get started cleaning things up. Here's one way, proposed by the philosopher [John Searle](#), to solve the problem.

We should distinguish two *kinds* of objectivity:

1. metaphysical objectivity, and
2. epistemological objectivity.

We also should distinguish two *kinds* of subjectivity:

1. metaphysical subjectivity, and
2. epistemological subjectivity.

Remember the distinction between metaphysics and epistemology?

Metaphysics consists of arguments and counterarguments about what we should call "real" or what we should say "is" or "has being". "Is free will real?" is a metaphysical question. In metaphysics, something *exists objectively* if its existence does not depend on its being experienced. For example, Antarctica and the Eiffel Tower exist objectively. They exist whether or not anyone has experienced them. Many realities are real in this way.

Something exists metaphysically *subjectively*, by contrast, if its existence depends on its being experienced — like a headache, or how Bourbon tastes to you. A particular headache *ceases to exist* if the person experiencing the headache stops feeling it. Many realities are real in this way, too — a different way.

Now, you might be thinking your headache is a metaphysically *objective* event, in the sense that your headache *is* just your brain state, and your brain state is potentially public and measurable. Or, you might say that your headache is metaphysically objective in the sense that it exists as an event in the history of the world; it is part of the stream of history just like any other event. I agree. Your headache IS a metaphysically objective event in these senses.

So how is a headache metaphysically subjective? Here we have to get a little technical and introduce the word *qualia* ("qualia" is plural; the singular is "quale"). There's been a lot of interesting debate in recent philosophy about qualia. A quale is, roughly, a "raw feel": the taste of pineapple, the particular red of ordinary tomatoes, the smell of wet dog, etc. Qualia are metaphysically subjective, in the sense that "the taste of pineapple" really comes down to "the taste of pineapple for me", and that taste might be unique to me, mine alone, and I can't ever find out if

the way it tastes for me is the same as the way it tastes for you, etc. [1] (I am assuming here that the taste of pineapple is consistent enough from pineapple to pineapple to allow me to recognize the resemblance among my pineapple experiences; otherwise, if the taste of pineapple changed radically from pineapple to pineapple, I wouldn't develop a concept of "the taste of pineapple".)

It's important to remember that on the view I'm defending, the word "subjective" is not an adjective that describes a class of beings. Instead, when we think about metaphysical subjectivity, we ought to think primarily in adverbial terms: "subjectively" is a way of being real (reality depends on being experienced). When I experience my dog, my experience of the dog exists metaphysically subjectively, since the experience goes out of being when I stop having it. Dogs, however, exist metaphysically objectively (if they exist at all and are not merely "in my mind").

What if I dream, imagine, hallucinate experiencing the Eiffel Tower? The Eiffel-Tower-I-hallucinate exists metaphysically subjectively (for me only); it does not exist metaphysically objectively. By contrast, the Eiffel Tower, if it exists, exists metaphysically objectively. I can say that with confidence! The only way I could deny that the Eiffel Tower exists metaphysically objectively would be to adopt metaphysical idealism, but, as we've seen, there aren't good enough reasons to go there. Once you stop taking idealism seriously, it's obvious that metaphysically subjective things (like tastes or headaches) do not exist in little self-contained vacuums. People have these experiences, and people are objects in the world. Persons, like everything else, have many metaphysically objective properties. So the metaphysically subjective usually "spills over" into the metaphysically objective. Headaches ordinarily come with a whole bunch of metaphysically objective aspects in addition to the felt pain. For example, people with headaches often say, "I have a headache", or they take aspirin, or lie down, or say they don't feel like having sex, etc. All the latter events are public and normal.

And, of course, people can lie about having a headache. They can feign the public behavior without the private experience.

Is this getting a little clearer?

Now let's turn to epistemology, the philosophical investigation of knowledge. Epistemology is largely about what statements are true or false. Statements are linguistic entities; they are strings of words or symbols. People use statements (as opposed to questions or exclamations) when they want to assert that something is so. The words "true" and "false" apply only to statements. Epistemology is about what makes the "true" statements true. We don't have to get into theories of truth right now. All we need to posit right now is that people customarily label some statements (e.g., "Antartica is a continent") "true," and some (e.g., "Sandy LaFave is the current U.S. President") "false." In epistemology, a statement (claim, assertion, proposition) is *epistemologically objective* if its truth value can be determined intersubjectively by generally-agreed methods or procedures. To say a statement is epistemologically objective is not to say the statement is true; it's just to say we could figure out a public method for determining whether or not the statement is true. For example, the statement "The Eiffel Tower is 10 feet tall" is epistemologically objective. Its truth value can be readily determined, and there's no disagreement about its truth value once we've agreed on the meanings of the terms in the sentences, and the measuring devices, etc. And once we apply the appropriate decision procedures, we find the statement is actually false; the Eiffel Tower is more than 10 feet tall. All observers using the same vocabulary and measuring devices would agree to that. We are said to *know* epistemologically objective claims that turn out to be true; and we do *not know* epistemologically objective claims that turn out to be false.

An issue is a *matter of fact* (or, if you prefer, a factual matter) if metaphysically objective data would decide the truth values of statements about it. An issue can be a matter of fact (a factual matter) even if we do not currently happen to have the metaphysically objective data. For example, whether or not O.J. Simpson murdered his wife is a factual matter (a matter of fact and NOT, in the philosophical sense, a matter of opinion), since we could agree on the truth value of the statement "O.J. murdered his wife" if we had access to all the relevant information about the case. O.J., as a matter of fact, either did murder his wife, or he didn't. The relevant event really took place, or it didn't, independently of anyone's experience. What happened happened, metaphysically objectively. And if reasonable people ever had access to all the relevant information about the case, reasonable people would all agree about what happened. The same is true of whether or not extraterrestrials have ever visited earth. That's a factual matter; either extraterrestrials have visited the earth or they haven't, independently of anyone's experience. And if we knew enough about extraterrestrials and had access to all the relevant data, and agreed about what could constitute sufficient evidence, we would be able to say (epistemologically objectively) whether the statement "Extraterrestrials have visited the earth" is true or false.

A claim is *epistemologically subjective* (or a *matter of opinion*) if the primary relevant evidence for determining the truth value of statements about the issue is metaphysically subjective. For example, the issue of whether vanilla ice cream tastes better than chocolate ice cream is a matter of opinion because the truth value of the statement "Vanilla ice cream tastes better than chocolate ice cream", uttered by a particular person, depends primarily on how the ice cream tastes to that person, and that taste is metaphysically subjective. Many aspects of ice-cream eating are matters of fact: a particular dish of ice cream has the chemical composition it has, for example, independently of anyone's experience. But taste is different; taste does not exist until somebody experiences it. (Remember this doesn't mean taste isn't REAL; taste simply exists in a metaphysically different way from the chemical composition.)

The statement "Vanilla ice cream tastes better than chocolate ice cream" might also be epistemologically objective. As noted above, people are public beings in a public world. If everyone who ate chocolate ice cream declared sincerely that it tasted awful, and vanilla ice cream tasted better, then metaphysically objective data would be available, and the statement "Vanilla ice cream tastes better than chocolate ice cream" would no longer be a matter of opinion, but a matter of fact. (It would become comparable to "Vanilla ice cream tastes better than Drano"; the ordinary response to the latter would be "Well, of course" — not "Well, that's YOUR opinion".)

A claim is NOT automatically a "matter of opinion" simply because people disagree about it. People disagree about both matters of opinion AND about matters of fact. But the two cases are quite different. The taste of the ice cream is metaphysically subjective; it exists ONLY as experienced. So the truth value of the statement "Vanilla ice cream tastes better than chocolate ice cream", under ordinary circumstances of discourse, depends primarily on each individual's metaphysically subjective experience of the taste. The issue is a mere matter of taste. On the other hand, ETs either have or haven't visited the earth, and at some future time, on the basis of shared evidence and reasoning, we could reasonably be said to have objectively determined the truth-value of the statement "As of (some date) ETs have visited" — whatever the truth value turns out to be. The relevant events that would determine the truth value either have or have not occurred: ETs have visited or they haven't, independently of anyone's experience.

Now, finally, we can ask some really interesting philosophical questions. Suppose we acknowledge that some things exist metaphysically subjectively, others exist metaphysically objectively. We also

grant that some statements are epistemologically subjective (mere matters of taste), and others are epistemologically objective. Okay — are ethical statements mere matters of opinion?

Most philosophers would say ethical statements are NOT mere matters of opinion, because there is wide interpersonal and intercultural agreement about what sort of person is a good person, and what sort of behavior is morally problematic. Certainly there are disagreements about ethical matters, but disagreements tend to be over *which of several commonly-accepted moral precepts should be applied to a particular case*. For example, people disagree about the morality of abortion, but both sides agree that, other things being equal, it's wrong to take innocent human life; we should take care of children the best we can; some pregnancies are unusually problematic; we should be compassionate towards women facing difficult choices, etc. The task is to reason our way to consensus, and most philosophers assume we are alike enough and reason similarly enough that some arguments will prove more compelling than others.

What about aesthetic judgments (like "Mozart's music is better than Copland's" or "*Amadeus* is a better movie than *Austin Powers*")? Are aesthetic judgments mere matters of opinion? Again, most philosophers would say no, though aesthetic disagreements might seem tougher to settle. But think of it this way. Suppose someone says "I think store-bought tomatoes taste better than home-grown tomatoes." Now, anyone who's eaten home-grown tomatoes would be incredulous: how could anyone with experience of both decide the store-bought tomatoes taste better? As a tomato grower, my first impulse would be to wonder if the speaker simply didn't understand which tomato was which; I would want to bring the speaker one of my home-grown tomatoes and ask again! Which is better? It's *just obvious* if you've experienced both. Something like that may be true for works of art as well. Maybe people who think *Austin Powers* is an excellent film simply have no idea what a good film is, and they'll change their minds gradually as they acquire more experience of life and art. All I'm proposing is that with aesthetic judgments, some people have relevant expertise.

So, to summarize, something is metaphysically objective if its mode of being is public. The Eiffel Tower exists in a metaphysically objective way, since its existence does not depend on its being experienced.

A claim is epistemologically objective if there are generally recognized methods for deciding whether the claim is true or false. For example, the claim "There are 45 desks in this room" is epistemologically objective. Note that "objective" now does not mean the same as "true," since the claim "There are 45 desks in this room" is objective whether or not it is true or false. "Objectivity," properly understood, presupposes the availability of a method for producing agreement among people.

Now here's the payoff. If an event is metaphysically subjective, claims about it can still be epistemologically objective! For example, consider pain again. If you had severe and unexplained pain, you would probably go to a doctor who would treat the pain as well as the underlying physical cause. There are even doctors who specialize in relief of pain. There are well-recognized physical drugs and therapies for pain relief. In other words, there's all kinds of epistemologically objective knowledge about what is metaphysically a subjective occurrence.

Do you see how this helps us out of ethical subjectivism? A moral subjectivist says in effect that moral judgments are either subjective or objective in the ordinary (over-simplified) senses described above.

The subjectivist then assumes that if you feel a certain way about X, you can't then be objective about X, since feelings are subjective and "subjective" and "objective" are supposed to be opposites. And if you can't be objective, you can't use math or logic, i.e., you can't reason.

Well, I've tried to show here that the subjectivist is wrong. Pain is felt, but it is more than "just feelings": there's a lot more we can say about pain than "I feel it" or "Ouch!" In the same way, morality is more than "just feelings" and there's a lot more we can say about it than "I feel it" or "Yuck!" or "Yay!". What we've just shown is that although moral feelings exist in a *metaphysically subjective* way, there can still be *epistemological objectivity* about them. Just as doctors can use epistemologically objective scientific methods to investigate metaphysically subjective matters like pain, so we can use epistemologically objective rational methods to investigate metaphysically subjective matters like moral feelings.

The basic problem with ethical subjectivism, in other words, is not its observation that people have feelings about moral matters. People do have feelings about moral matters; no question about that. But the fact that people have feelings about morality doesn't disqualify them from thinking about it too. And once you allow that people can reason about morality, you undermine ethical subjectivism entirely, since as a matter of fact, not all arguments are equivalent, some are better than others, and so some people's moral claims are objectively more worthy of belief than others — because they are more reasonable.

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#### FOOTNOTE

[1]There's currently an extremely interesting debate raging in philosophy over the metaphysical significance of qualia. The issue is whether or not qualia refute materialism (the metaphysical position that everything is ultimately "stuff"). Do qualia exemplify non-material realities? Some philosophers, e.g., Frank Jackson and David Chalmers, think so. [Back](#)

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