

BEYOND MODES OF OBJECTIVITY

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ABSTRACT: Frege, and others who followed him, stressed the role of fallibility as a means to defining 'objectivity.' By defining objective judgments as fallible, these philosophers contributed to the consolidation of a theory of objectivity which suggested interpreting epistemological, as well as other judgements, as being objective. An important philosophical implication of this theory lies in its disclosure of the inter-relations between truth and objectivity. In light of this insight, and based on an analysis of instances of false (epistemological and other) judgments, I show that truth and objectivity go hand-in-hand, while falsity and objectivity do not. This finding alone indicates the necessity to revise the theory of objectivity.

KEYWORDS: objectivity, subjectivity, epistemology, fallibility, truth

Thales is recognized as the first Western philosopher because of his claim that discrepancies exist between one's own and others' perceptions of things, and what, in reality, things are. In claiming that "all things are water," Thales was in effect saying that while the world appears to be made up of many different types of things, in effect there is only one thing; for, in the end, everything is, in reality, made up of water. In this claim, Thales drew a distinction between appearance and reality, a distinction that was to become the basis of Western philosophy and science: 'reality' is not simply what seems to be true, but that which is objectively true.

My aim here is to explore the extent to which objectivity and truth are inter-related notions. I defend an account of objectivity which shows it to be a notion whose meaning is context-dependent rather than constant. This account of objectivity does not imply that any claim can be simultaneously regarded as being both objective and subjective. Rather, it means that what is objective in one context is not necessarily so in another. I shall also argue against a notion that has been defended by Robert Nozick and Amartya Sen, that false claims can, in many contexts, be regarded as objective. In light of this insight, and based on an analysis of instances of false (epistemological and other) judgments, I show that truth and objectivity go hand-in-hand, while falsity and objectivity do not. This finding alone indicates the necessity to revise the theory of objectivity.

I distinguish between two types of contexts in referring to 'objectivity': the epistemic context, in which we evaluate claims about the world (in philosophy and the sciences, for example), and the judgmental daily context, in which we

Robert Albin

make normative judgments about artistic, moral, professional, and legal issues, as well as about peoples' character and the worthwhileness of engaging or not engaging in certain acts.

I. The Epistemic Context

The notion of objectivity is often used in a context which presupposes the existence of a world which is independent of our perception of it.¹ This notion of objectivity is not a single one but rather includes multiple versions. Frege, like Plato, believed in the inherent objectivity of abstract entities (ideas). Others, like Aristotle, considered objectivity in more concrete terms; they conceived of the world as consisting of everyday entities, the existence of which is independent of our perception of them. Locke added to this discourse the concept of 'primary' qualities. In Kant's view of objectivity, the world of phenomena is governed by inviolable rules that apply equally to all perceivers. The linguistic turn in philosophy helped mitigate some of the conceptual problems caused by ontological imperatives and epistemological considerations in formulating philosophical views. However, towards the end of the last century, various philosophers, headed by Richard Rorty in the English-speaking world, contended that the epistemological vocabulary concerning objectivity should be replaced by a normative one. Rorty went so far as to recommend replacing talk about objectivity with talk about social invariance. More specifically, he recommended replacing talk about objectivity with talk about solidarity.² Then again, some analytically inclined philosophers argued that objectivity should be considered as a property of descriptions.

Despite the many different attempts by philosophers to define objectivity, epistemologically or normatively, they all share one fundamental presupposition: they all presuppose objective claims to be fallible. Frege, and others who followed him, stressed the role of fallibility as a means to defining 'objectivity.' By defining objective judgments as fallible, these philosophers contributed to the consolidation of a theory of objectivity which suggested interpreting epistemological, as well as other judgements, as being objective. An important philosophical implication of this theory lies in its disclosure of the inter-relations between truth and objectivity. In a more detailed manner, Frege claimed that objectivity is the feature of being able to justify a claim according to some external criterion.³

¹ Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

² Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

³ Gottlob Frege, *The Foundations of Arithmetic*, trans. J. L. Austin (Oxford: Basil-Blackwell, 1954)

According to this view, an objective claim can only be made if there is a criterion for establishing its truth value. The absence of such a criterion, according to this view, renders a claim subjective. For example, consider the following two claims:

1. I have a headache.
2. I think I have a headache.

Despite the linguistic difference, semantically, the meanings of the two claims are identical. The phrase “I think” (in claim 2) plays no semantic role. A person cannot be mistaken about her or his own sensation of pain. Whatever she or he senses is true by virtue of that very sensation alone. Unlike their objective counterparts, subjective claims admit of no gap between the world and the one who experiences it. Therefore, what seems to be the case in a subjective claim actually is the case. Claim 1 is subjective, and as such, differs from a claim such as, “Today the sky is blue,” the truth value of which is determined by comparing it with reality and not with one’s sensations or feelings. Asserting this on a cloudy day would, of course, reveal its falsity. However, as I have just adumbrated, objectivity is equated with fallibility; one would be justified in regarding the claim “The sky is blue” on a cloudy day as an objective, albeit false, claim.

Amartya Sen has argued that the truth of an objective claim can be ascertained by resorting to a particular criterion, such as to whether it corresponds to external reality.⁴ In his view, a false claim can be regarded as objective, insofar as the truth value of the claim is distinguished from its objectivity mode. Sen’s account thus posits two criteria for every claim, one for determining whether it is true or false and another for determining whether it is objective or subjective.

To exemplify Sen’s perspective, let us take the statement that “The Earth is stationary while the Sun revolves around it.” Five hundred years ago, this statement was universally acknowledged to be true. Today, Sen would regard that statement as false but at the same time objective. How can his position be justified? Objectivity, Sen claims, displays a sort of invariance; in his view, objectivity is not so much a “view from nowhere,” but a “view of no one in particular.” Observational claims, he asserts, can be both position-dependent and person-invariant.⁵ In other words, to qualify as objective, a perceptual claim must be one that would be accepted by everyone who views it under given conditions of observation. Sen assumes that all people observing a particular object from a particular fixed vantage would have identical perceptions of the object observed.

⁴ Amartya Sen, “Positional Objectivity,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 22, 2 (1993): 126-145.

⁵ Sen, “Positional Objectivity,” 129.

In his discussion of objectivity, Nozick takes a different view of invariance, in which he relates directly to its truth value: “An objective fact is invariant under various transformations. It is this invariance that constitutes something as an objective truth...”⁶ He concedes that the ability to distinguish between correct and incorrect transformations is a function of empirical knowledge, unrelated to *a priori* considerations. Yet, the most interesting point about Nozick’s position is his assumption of the close relationship between truth and objectivity. Truth, for Nozick, is the hallmark of objectivity; a claim is objective if its truth value remains constant, even after transformations have been made. For example, assuming the truth of the statement “The Earth revolves around the Sun.” This truth would not change, even after undergoing transformations, say, for example, by astronomical observations or by calculations made from Mars. Hence, the claim would prove to be an objective one.

In short, Nozick and Sen do not share the same view. While Nozick accepts the single criterion of truth value as a means of defining objectivity, Sen asserts that the criterion for truth (such as correspondence with reality) must be distinguished from the criterion for objectivity itself (such as the invariance of persons). Arguably, Nozick’s view is more streamlined than Sen’s, but a number of questions remain. For example, in another context, Nozick surprisingly seems to acknowledge the possibility of objective falsities: “an objective belief can turn out to be false. (So too can a justified belief.)”⁷ Not only does this statement seem to contradict what was previously understood as his denial of the existence of objective falsities, it also employs the term ‘belief’ in an incongruous and hence ambiguous manner. In everyday talk, there is no room for ‘objective belief.’ Beliefs can be justified or not justified, true, false, blind, or rational, but they cannot be objective. Further examination, however, indicates that there is only a semblance of a contradiction for Nozick, as he distinguishes between two contexts of objectivity, one concerned with beliefs and another concerned with facts. In drawing this distinction he is, in effect, putting forward two different criteria for objectivity, one for each of the contexts. While the objectivity of a fact is established by its truth, another approach is required to establish the objectivity of a belief: “...[It] is reached by a certain sort of process, one that does not involve biasing or distorting factors that lead away from the truth.”⁸ Objective false beliefs are misguided or inaccurate but nonetheless they are objective. The formation of a

⁶ Robert Nozick, *Invariances: The Structure of the Objective World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

⁷ Nozick, *Invariances*, 94.

⁸ Nozick, *Invariances*, 94

true belief, though anchored in reliable factors, may still be distorted by contingencies. According to Nozick, those reliable factors are what grant objective status to a belief.

In my view, Nozick's 'factors' become the norms and rules that form the basis of our beliefs. We share common norms, which help mould our practices into uniform modes of behaviour. The norms, therefore, are independent of our perceptions. Consider the sentence, "He don't understand me"; it clearly requires grammatical correction. Only in light of rules and norms can we distinguish between true and false, good and bad, and right and wrong. Rules constitute what Wittgenstein called "language-games." They function as construed modes of cultural practice and as such, are part and parcel of the context in which we make our epistemological judgments.⁹ The truth value of a claim such as "Water boils at 100°C" is to be determined by experiments carried out according to a concrete set of rules of verification. These rules, in turn, form the stage upon which our claims play their roles as truths or falsities. Wittgenstein viewed epistemological rules as normative in the sense that the rules of grammar are normative. Nozick acknowledges that, as reliable as they may be, norms and rules cannot guarantee the certainty of the judgments they sustain. They aspire to be part of the bedrock of rationality; yet, as Wittgenstein noted, they can be employed in a variety of ways, not all of which are correct. Nevertheless, Nozick was attracted to the notion that norms exist independently of our perceptions, and Sen would have nodded in agreement.

Both Nozick and Sen attempt to preserve the notion of objective falsities to varying extents. Regarding what Nozick called objective facts, it should be stressed that he maintained only one criterion by which the truth value, and at the same time its mode of objectivity, could be determined. The use of a single criterion for establishing both the truth value and the objectivity mode raises the question of how actually to distinguish between the two. If truth value and objectivity are indistinguishable, then 'objectivity' and 'truth' can only converge to the extent that they lose their distinct identities. This, I believe, is sufficient for dismissing the distinction between 'objectivity' and 'truth' on the grounds that it is non-productive. This is a sufficient reason for rejecting Nozick's latter view and, at same time, is also a reason calling for a re-examination of his account of false beliefs.

Prima facie, the assertion that false claims can be objective does not seem problematic. On a day-to-day level, we are not overly perturbed by objective falsities. However, upon deeper examination, the fallaciousness of objective

⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), #204, #410.

falsities emerges when we begin to question their truth value. The establishment of a claim as false renders its mode of objectivity as irrelevant, for it ceases to be of significance to ordinary people in daily life. Having established a claim as false, its objectivity mode is seen to lose its epistemological value, for there is no context in which people in the stream of ordinary life would have any use for the mode of objectivity of a false claim. Consider a train passenger mistakenly being told by another passenger that the last train will be leaving the station in five minutes. Having discovered the falsity of the claim, the passenger will have no interest in or use of its objectivity mode. Ordinarily, an interest in such a claim would focus entirely on whether it was true. This passenger, like all others, is expected to act on the basis of information consisting of true claims about timetables. If a claim is not true, its specific source is no longer of any relevance and it serves no purpose, as the only thing that really matters is whether or not a train is expected. Like Hollywood stunt designers who concern themselves with the intricate off-camera machinations unseen by viewers, philosophers are among the few concerned with such a deserted area of our epistemological day-to-day life, and only they are inclined to consider these falsities to be objective. Accordingly, and consistent with Nozick's intuition regarding the objectivity of truths, we have to admit that a false claim cannot be considered objective, and hence it is of no epistemological worth.

It could be argued that this view, which considers objective falsities as of no epistemological worth, can be refuted by biblical stories. Like many other myths, biblical stories are about events that, according to many, never took place. The claims embodied in biblical narrative are often considered objective, even though literally, they are false. Yet, even though these falsities may appear to be objective, for those who regard them as myths, they have no epistemological significance. On the other hand, their falsity does not render them insignificant to human culture. On the contrary, myths play important roles in our cultural make-up and educational endeavours. Many who take myths seriously view them as the textual core of their cultural existence, and for them, they are indeed part of the bedrock from which their cultural, psychological, and sometimes even professional identities are hewn out of. However, irrespective of the importance we ascribe to myths, we know that they portray imaginary facts and events; i.e., they are not literally true stories but false ones. That is why we label them 'myths.' They contain claims about the world, and can also be seen to reveal something about those who would relate to them. Were these claims true, they would teach us something about the world they portray. Their failure to express literally true statements undermines their epistemological value. Since mythological

descriptions are literally false, they cannot satisfy any epistemological needs, and hence their objectivity is never taken into consideration in evaluating them. We do not turn to myths to enhance our knowledge of the world.

Another example of objective falsity is the physician's diagnosis, which is sometimes mistaken. A patient may realize that something is amiss when her health condition fails to improve. She believes she suffers from kidney disease, but is diagnosed by her doctor as suffering from a liver ailment. Her condition does not improve even after receiving liver treatment, so some time later she goes to another doctor and receives a second opinion. The new diagnosis rejects the former one, and identifies her kidneys as the problem. She is put on a different type of treatment and her condition improves. Should the first diagnosis be dismissed as completely useless? Being false, it appears to be medically useless. It has no epistemological value as it teaches us nothing about our health.

Objectivity, then, plays a minor theme in the epistemological concerto. The main theme is played by truth. Our quest in this world begins with the search for truth rather than for objectivity. Objectivity can support the truth by reassuring us that it is related to the world and is not a mere individual hallucination or imaginary whim. Under these terms, truth becomes independent of any idiosyncratic perception. However, we tend to inquire into the texture of true claims to ascertain not only their truth value, but also their objectivity. Our search for objectivity is enhanced by the special place subjective claims play in our lives. Subjective claims are of no real epistemological value for those who seek knowledge about the world. Although subjective claims may be true or false, their contents are not open to any verification. A person complaining of pain may actually be feeling no pain at all. She is making a false subjective utterance. From a Wittgensteinian point of view, such a sentence clearly bears some knowledge for others, but none for the speaker. Subjective judgments are, therefore, incapable of representing the non-psychological world, but are nonetheless effective tools of self-expression and, in addition, an important means of learning about the world of others, although not through examination of their truth value. Statements such as, "I'm happy" or "Look at her, she's so attractive" are vehicles for expressing feelings. These utterances do not actually describe one's feelings or portray the woman mentioned. They are cultural modes of expression that we use instead of primitive shouts and gestures to respond to what we experience.

My goal so far in this paper has been to show the relative importance of objectivity and of false claims: neither has epistemological significance. Only true claims can be regarded as objective, and only under certain conditions. Only after we accept a claim as being true can we accept it as also being objective. If a

Robert Albin

statement is not true it has no epistemological value. Only by following this line of thought can we appreciate the contribution of Nozick's work. It also provides a better interpretation of his insistence on the interrelatedness of the mode of objectivity and the truth value of a claim. As Nozick correctly pointed out, truth and objectivity are closely related, but they are not identical.

II. The Ordinary Judgmental Context

In ordinary life, people with a highly developed sense of justice or obligation to others are described as being faithful to their 'personal truth.' Such individual truth does not require reinforcement through objectivity as it merely expresses its bearer's sense of moral obligation, as opposed to her cognitive understanding of reality. This is simply another case in which 'truth' is employed in a non-epistemological context.

To take a concrete example, let us consider a woman tasting wine at a winery. She may say to herself, "This is a great Cabernet, very good indeed!" Can such a judgment be refuted? Is there any objective possibility of justifying her judgment that the Cabernet is of good quality? In other words, is this judgment right or wrong, or is it merely a matter of personal taste, and as such, subjective? Wittgenstein reminded us to regard certain aesthetic judgments as simply utterances of enthusiasm: "[Words] such as 'lovely' are first used as interjections."¹⁰ Referring to the wine as 'great' is consistent with this line of thought. But what about the woman's statement that "The wine is good"? Is this an objective judgment? Searle would answer such a question with an unequivocal negation,¹¹ while Wittgenstein elaborates: "In learning the rules you get a more and more refined judgment. Learning the rules actually changes your judgment."¹² I find Wittgenstein's view more accurate and delicate than Searle's; applying Wittgenstein's observation to the wine tasting case, we could say that mastering the production of wine, particularly good wine, requires a great deal of professional skill and knowledge; it requires expertise in cultivating grapes, extracting their sugar, controlling the alcohol content, attaining the desired tint, etc. The standards for performing these tasks, many of which are grounded in age-old traditions, are taught in wine academies throughout the world. It is by these same standards that a wine's taste, colour, and aroma are judged. In view of these standards, the wine-tasting example demonstrates that objective judgments

¹⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief*, ed. Cyril Barrett (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), I, paragraph 9.

¹¹ John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1995).

¹² Wittgenstein, *Lectures*, I, paragraph 15.

regarding the quality of wine are possible, and as such, they can be right or wrong, and not merely true or false as in the epistemological context. In fact, our daily lives include endless usages of the categories of good and bad, in addition to the categories of true and false. At times, we say that the food in such-and-such a restaurant is good. We say that Michael Jordan was a great basketball player, if not the best to ever set foot on the court. Are these two latter judgments objective? Since they are fallible, it seems that they meet the objectivity criterion. The statement about Michael Jordan does not imply that it is impossible to disprove that he was the best basketball player ever; however, the disagreement alone does not render the statement subjective. By the same token, two mathematicians can argue about the right mathematical proof for a certain theorem. They may negate each other's opinions, but the dispute alone does not justify labelling either of their opinions as subjective. One or both of them may be wrong; but, if one of them is right, then her judgment is objective.

Michael Jordan's case seems to differ from the dispute over a mathematical proof, as arguably there is no accepted criterion for determining the best basketball player in the world, while there are accepted clear and distinctive criteria for determining the veracity of mathematical proofs. Given the absence of any such criteria for labelling Michael Jordan as the best basketball player ever, such a judgment would be subjective. Other difficulties might arise in cases where more than one criterion applies to a specific judgement, and in which the criteria may be in conflict. Multiple criteria make the justification of our particular judgments even more difficult, although not impossible. Though we may lack a shared criterion (or criteria) for determining who is the greatest basketball player, this lack does not preclude the full or partial acceptance of a criterion (or criteria) which could resolve the issue. Different groups may adopt different criteria, but once an accepted criterion is used by a community, its judgments can be regarded as objective. By analogy, consider the correct grammatical use of a native language. What is considered as a grammatical sentence in English, for example, is not necessarily considered as grammatical in Greek. Both languages have their own sets of rules for determining grammatical correctness, but this does not imply that such determinations are subjective.

The intriguing question here is whether or not a judgment that is regarded as incorrect can nonetheless be regarded as objective. It seems that incorrect normative judgments, like false epistemological judgments, do not merit the title of objectivity. For, what sense of objectivity can there be in a claim such as, "Basketball players are allowed to take more than two steps on the court while the ball is in their hands"? This claim is a mistaken report of the rules according to

which the game is played, and not a mere subjective claim. As with false epistemological judgments, we are not interested in the objectivity of a normative claim once it is known to be incorrect. Nonetheless, in many cases people say their judgements are objective, as a means to strengthen them against being seen as subjective. In many cases, declaring a claim as being objective seems to involve no more than assigning it a barely justified superlative.

The final category of judgments that I would like to discuss, which differs from those discussed above, concerns judgments related to professional appointments. Take the example of applicants being considered for a CEO position in a big business corporation. One of the company board members favours a particular candidate for no other reason than that he likes the candidate – the board member sees the candidate as a nice and easygoing man. One may say that the board member's preference is rooted in a subjective judgment. Later, the same board member sees that he is mistaken, and he changes his mind – he sees that this man is not nice, nor is he easygoing. This example reveals that even subjective judgments are fallible, and as such, seems to undermine, if not totally negate, the fundamental criterion for distinguishing between objective and subjective claims. The blurred distinction between objective and subjective poses a dilemma: either we accept the judgment as subjective, at the expense of finding another criterion for its subjectivity, or we choose to demonstrate that it is not a subjective judgment after all.

To elaborate, I suggest distinguishing between the right judgment in selecting a candidate for the CEO position, and the manner in which a board member makes his initial judgment. A 'right judgment' should have taken into account the character traits and qualifications of the candidate, such as leadership, integrity, communication skills, and professional experience. If the board member had weighed all of these qualities against the demands of the job, he would probably have arrived at a different decision. As we well know, feelings affect our judgments and sometimes even reverse them, which is why we strive to keep our judgments on a professional plane – to overcome the problem of biased decision-making. We prefer to make our judgments according to professional rules, in this case, a set of criteria for hiring. In our example, the board member erred by choosing the wrong person for the job. Mistakes are likely in many of the judgments we make; yet, this does not justify their classification as subjective judgments. Another example of confusion between incorrect and subjective judgements would be a miscalculation by a math student. She may believe that she has arrived at the correct answer, but later realize that she had not executed the

calculation properly. This example also serves as a reminder not to confuse what is subjective with what is incorrect or false.

As is the case for other famous philosophical pairs, a significant tension is maintained between objectivity and subjectivity. Traditionally they were sought as opposites to each other. In exploring the relations between objectivity and truth (and what is correct) I wish to draw from this paper two conclusions. First, truth and objectivity go hand-in-hand, whereas falsity and objectivity do not. Objectivity is related primarily to 'truth' and 'rightness' (or 'correctness'); its supreme importance lies in the fact that its recognition requires us to use our minds in a manner that transcends the boundaries of our own consciousness and embraces the external world. This finding alone indicates the necessity to revise the theory of objectivity. Second, subjective judgements are not necessarily wrong or false judgements.