

The Objective Status of Subjective Facts

Abstract: Some facts are objective. Some facts are subjective. Subjective facts are personal facts about individuals. It is the purpose of this short note to suggest that subjective facts are in fact objective facts about us. This applies not just to facts involving relations to entities that are independent of us, but to our tastes. It is an objective fact about us that we have the tastes that we do though there may be no objective matter of fact that our tastes reflect or fail to reflect.

Keywords: objective; subjective; facts; taste

I.

My first car was a Ford Mustang. My earliest memories are from Europe. I grew up in southern California. I prefer vanilla ice cream to chocolate. I do not enjoy the taste of Brussels Sprouts.

These are facts about me. They are personal facts. I shall refer to them as “subjective facts”.

The subjective is usually contrasted with the objective. The subjective and the objective are opposites of one another. This suggests that subjective facts are not objective facts. Insofar as they are subjective, such facts fail to be objective. But is that right?

I wish to suggest that there is a sense in which subjective facts such as the ones I have mentioned are perfectly objective. It is an objective fact that these subjective facts exist. These subjective facts are in fact objective facts. Subjective facts have an objective status.

II.

Those who know me may think it strange I ever owned a Mustang. Indeed, they may doubt it to be the case. To persuade them, I could describe the car as well as the circumstances under which I acquired it. I could describe its state of disrepair as well as how I disposed of it. If I still had the records, I could provide evidence of the insurance policy that I had for the car. I could even seek confirmation of my ownership of the car from the relevant motor vehicle authority that provided the license plate for the car. Perhaps I might be able to locate an old photograph of me standing next to it. Maybe there is a diary entry in one of the journals that I kept at the time.

But these are just steps I might take to prove I once owned a Mustang. They are, of course, relevant to the question of how I might show that I once owned the car. They might be taken as evidence to that effect. As such, they relate to an epistemic question about evidence that might constitute grounds for the belief that I once owned the car. They do not constitute the fact that I once owned the car.

Such epistemic considerations might well be (or fail to be) objective. They might provide epistemically objective grounds for the claim (or belief) that I owned the car. But that is not the sense of objectivity that I am interested in here. I am interested in the objectivity of the fact that I once owned the car. That is an ontological form of objectivity rather than an epistemic form of objectivity. It relates to the way the world is rather than to the basis for belief (or knowledge) about the way the world is.

The fact that I once owned the car does not depend upon my being able to provide evidence that I once owned the car. Even if no records exist (perhaps because the records have been destroyed or lost), it remains the case that I owned the car. Even if I have forgotten that I once owned the car, it remains the case that I did. I might mistakenly believe that I owned a Falcon, though it was in fact a Mustang. It is a fact about me that I once owned the car whether

or not I can prove that I did, whether or not I am able to recall that I once did and whether or not I believe that I did.

This fact about me, I claim, is an objective fact about me. It is a subjective fact about me that has objective status. It is a perfectly objective subjective fact. No doubt, similar remarks apply to the facts about my earliest memories from Europe and growing up in southern California. But one might think that these are not the interesting questions about subjective facts. The interesting questions are ones about taste. Let us consider these.

III.

We all know the principle expressed by the Latin words *de gustibus non est disputandum*. I do not propose to dispute that principle here. I wish simply to reflect on the nature of facts about taste. There may be no fact of the matter to dispute in matters of taste. And yet there may be a matter of fact about one's tastes. For there may be objective facts about one's likes and dislikes.

Let us start with vanilla ice cream. I appreciate a good bowl of chocolate ice cream. But there is something cleaner, simpler, fresher, about vanilla ice cream that makes me prefer vanilla to chocolate. I know that others may prefer chocolate to vanilla. Indeed, I may sometimes choose chocolate over vanilla. But, in general, I prefer vanilla to chocolate.

That is a fact about me. It is a subjective fact about me that I prefer vanilla to chocolate. Even if you think that I am wrong to prefer vanilla to chocolate, it remains a fact about me that I prefer vanilla to chocolate. There might be some objective sense in which chocolate is better than vanilla, so that I am wrong to prefer vanilla to chocolate. Still, it remains a fact about me that I prefer vanilla to chocolate.

It is a subjective fact about me that I prefer vanilla to chocolate. But it is a perfectly objective fact about me. It is objectively the case that I prefer vanilla to chocolate. It is an objective fact that I prefer vanilla even if everybody else prefers chocolate to vanilla. It remains objectively the case that I prefer vanilla even if I am *per impossibile* objectively mistaken that vanilla is better than chocolate.

IV.

What about those pesky sprouts?

I once had a lengthy discussion with a philosopher (a Nietzsche scholar, no less) who thought I was quite wrong about Brussels Sprouts. He sought to persuade me otherwise. Apparently, the trick is to make a cruciform incision at the base of the sprout. One then adds butter to boiling salted water. The sprouts are cooked until quite soft (but not mushy). I admit to having tried this approach. It does make the sprouts more palatable, though the tell-tale flavour is still detectable.

But notice what we are doing here. We are not disputing the objective fact that I dislike Brussels Sprouts. That is beyond dispute. Nor are we considering whether there is some fact of the matter about the good-tasting properties of sprouts that has somehow escaped me. What we are considering is a recipe that alters the taste of the sprouts in such a way that I find them palatable.

Nothing about the possibility of such a recipe suggests in the least that it is not the case that I find the taste of Brussels Sprouts to be unpleasant. That remains a fact about me. Again, it is a subjective fact about me. But it is a subjective fact about me that obtains objectively. It is objectively the case that I do not like the taste of Brussels Sprouts. It is an objective subjective fact, as strange as that may sound.

V.

Where does this leave us?

There are, I claim, subjective facts. These are personal facts about us. They may relate to our personal history, our circumstances, our background and experience, our likes and dislikes, among a great many things.

These subjective facts are objective. They are objective facts about us. Strange as it may sound, they are objective subjective facts. Subjective facts have the status of objective facts.

VI.

A brief coda: In an earlier paper (2022), I suggested that the notion of an objective fact has a connection with the notion of an object. It is the way that an object is that makes it the case that a given objective fact obtains. Objective facts are or consist in objects having certain properties or entering certain relations with other objects.

A similar point applies in the case of subjective facts. As it happens, all my examples involve relations.¹ The subjective fact that I once owned a Mustang consists in my entering (or having once entered) the relation of ownership with a particular car. The subjective facts about my earliest memories and growing up consist in my entering into the relation of having memories of or having grown up in certain locations. The subjective fact about my preferring vanilla to chocolate ice cream involves my entering into the relation of preferring one to the other to two different flavours of ice cream. The subjective fact that I do not enjoy the taste of

¹ Not that there is any lack of properties. For example, I am more than six feet tall, have brown hair, blue eyes, and poor eyesight. Thus, for example, I have the property of being more than six feet tall. Here, an object, namely me, has the property of being more than six feet tall. The objective fact that I am more than six feet tall is based in a property of the object, in particular the property that I have of being more than six feet tall.

Brussels Sprouts involves my entering into a certain relation with Brussels Sprouts, namely, the relation of not liking the taste of.

I do not offer this point in the spirit of an analysis or theory of the nature of subjective facts. Rather, I offer it as further evidence that subjective facts are objective facts.

Reference

Sankey, Howard (2022), 'Objective Facts', *Metaphysica* 23 (1), pp. 117-121