

The Objective and the Subjective

Points of View and No Point of View at All

Three Disagreements

- * Abortion

- * It's always wrong: it doesn't matter when, where, or how. It's wrong.
- * No it's not: sometimes it's perfectly permissible. Stop trying to impose your repressive views on others.

- * Comedy

- * I'll tell you what's really funny. I don't know whether you've ever seen it: The Revenge of the Nerds.
- * Really, are you kidding me? What's so funny about that? It's sexist, exploitative, and in the end becomes the very thing it purports to satirize.

- * Beauty

- * You know what's really beautiful? Mahler's Second Symphony. The Resurrection.
- * Mahler? Give me a break. He's an exercise in tedium. *Zzzzzz*.

Another Disagreement

- * The square root of 9 is 3.
 - * No, it's not. It's 81.
- * Uh, no, that's 9 squared. The square root of 9 is 3.
 - * Well, that's what you think. That's your opinion.
- * Yes, that is what I think. Yes, you're right: that is my opinion. —And I have that opinion, because it's true.
 - * According to you.

Still One More Disagreement

- * God exists.

- * Grow up.

- * I can believe in God if I want to.

- * Hmm? Can you believe in the Easter Bunny, too?

- * The Easter Bunny is not the same as God.

- * Right—but I can believe *that* if I want to, too. Right? Like I said: grow up.

Disagreements?

- * One might think that one kind of disagreement is resolvable, because:
 - * There are proofs in that domain, whatever it is.
 - * They are scientific—and so empirically verifiable.
 - * They are *objective*.
- * The other kinds of disagreements are either:
 - * Disagreements that have no resolution, like a disagreement about whether blueberry ice cream is better than chocolate ice cream.
- * Or
 - * Not really disagreements at all. What is being said beyond, ‘I like blueberry better than chocolate’ and ‘You like chocolate better than blueberry.’?
 - * Both statements are true and hardly in conflict with one another.
 - * They’re just reports of two different states of mind. States, if you will, of two different subjects.
 - * There is no disagreement in the realm of the *subjective*. Only seeming disagreements, which are, upon inspection, revealed

A Conceptual Conflict

- * Most people do not regard moral judgments as objectively true or false.
- * Yet most people make free and easy moral judgments, speaking as if what they were saying were somehow *true*.
- * Moreover, moral conflicts seem perfectly real and perfectly genuine.

On one side. . .

- * Moral claims are not empirically verifiable.
- * Only what is empirically verifiable is objectively true or false.
- * So, moral claims are not objectively true or false.

. . . and on the other

- * People speak as if moral judgments were more than mere make-believe.
- * When it is said that genocide is *wrong*, or not morally *permissible*, the suggestion does not seem to be akin to, e.g.:
 - * I don't like ginger ice-cream.
 - * Boo Manchester United!

The Conflict

- * Moral judgments are not objective, since there are, after all, no *moral facts*. Since they are not objective, it follows that moral judgments are subjective.
- * Moral judgments are not subjective, since it is, after all, *true* that murder and rape are always and everywhere wrong. Since they are not subjective, it follows that moral judgments are objective.
- * Plainly, however, no judgment is both objective and subjective. So, something must give.

Some Terminological Clarity

- * A property Φ is *subjective* =_{df} Φ constitutively depends on the psychological attitudes or responses an observer has to some phenomenon.
- * A property Φ is *objective* =_{df} Φ is not subjective.

Two Questions

- * If this the right way to think about the objective/subjective distinction?
- * If so, which properties are objective and which subjective?
 - * Mathematical?
 - * Moral?
 - * Scientific?
 - * Aesthetic?
 - * Theistic properties?
 - * Logic?
 - * Perceptual?

A Case Considered

- * On the one hand there is the position that one's decisions should be tested ultimately from an external point of view, to which one appears as just one person among others. The question then becomes, 'What would be best? Which of the acts within my power would do the most good, considering matters from out here, impersonally?'
- * On the other hand there is the position that since an agent lives his life from where he is, even if he manages to achieve an impersonal view of his situation, whatever insights result from this detachment need to be made part of a personal view before they can influence decision and action. The pursuit of what seems impersonally best may be an important aspect of individual life, but its place in that life must be determined from a personal standpoint, because life is always the life of a particular person, and cannot be lived *sub specie aeternitatis*. —Nagel (1979, 205)

Give up the objective?

- * The only alternative to these unsatisfactory moves is to resist the voracity of the objective appetite, and stop assuming that understanding of the world and our position in it can always be advanced by detaching from that position and subsuming whatever appears from there under a single more comprehensive conception. Perhaps the best or truest view is not obtained by transcending oneself as far as possible. Perhaps reality should not be identified with objective reality. —Nagel (1979, 212)

But then. . .

* AO = Objective truth and falsity do not exist.

* But then. . .

1. If AO, then AO itself is either objectively true or not objectively true.
2. If AO is objectively true, then there are objective truths and AO is false.
3. If AO is not objectively true, then if it is to be accepted, this can only because it is experience-cohering.
4. If it is experience cohering, then it coheres either with *our* experience or *your* (*scil.* individual) experience.
5. It does not cohere with *our* experience.
6. Hence, if it is experience-cohering, then it coheres with *your* experience.
7. If AO holds only that it coheres with *your* experience, then: (a) it is absurdly solipsistic and (b) it is in fact incapable of being articulated so as to frame a disagreement.
8. If (7a) and (7b), then AO is effectively self-refuting or otherwise self-undermining.