

# What Is Subjectivity?

Blithering Genius

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## 1 Introduction

Recently, I have been in debates that involved the concept of subjectivity, and I discovered that many people are confused by it, or don't have a clear understanding of it. So, I thought I would try to explain it.

"Subjectivity" can have different meanings in different contexts. It can mean consciousness, or the content of consciousness. It can also mean that a claim or property is relative to a subject, or depends on the perspective of a subject. By "subject", I mean a mind. I am going to focus on the second meaning.

Something is subjective if it is mind-dependent or perspective-dependent.

Let's consider a simple example: left and right. Your left is defined relative to you. Your left is not my left. If I am facing you, then my left is your right and vice versa. Left and right are perspective-dependent. They differ depending on one's perspective. There is no cosmic left and right.

Forward and backward are similar. They depend on a perspective and a direction of motion.

Up and down are also perspective-dependent, but in a less obvious way. Up and down are relative to a position on the Earth (or some other planet). Essentially, the up-down axis is a line from your position to the center of gravity of the Earth. The up-down axis is not perceptibly different for people

in the same room, or the same city, but it differs a lot between China and Canada. There is no cosmic up and down.

In the past, many people naturally thought of the Earth as a flat surface, and up and down as a cosmic axis. In the somewhat more sophisticated Ptolemaic cosmology, up and down were not absolute, but the center of the Earth was. In modern cosmology, we know that the Earth is a ball in space that rotates once a day and orbits the Sun once a year. There is no cosmic up and down, and the universe has no center.

This is a good example of how something that seems objective/absolute can be reconceptualized as subjective/relative.

## **2 Experience is Subjective**

Experience is “mind-stuff”. Experience is part of the informational content of the mind. Looking into the blue sky is an experience, and the content of that experience is inextricable from the experiencer. No one else can experience my experiences. You can’t see the world through my eyes, and I can’t see it through yours. We could look at the same object, and have very similar brain states, but our experiences would not be the same. Suppose that I see you stubbing your toe and saying “ouch”. I would know that you are experiencing pain. I could imagine what it is like, based on my background knowledge and memories. But I would not experience your pain.

Experience is subjective in two ways. It is tied to a perspective, and it exists within the mind of the experiencer. It is not accessible to anyone else.

## **3 Truth is Subjective**

The notion of “objective truth” is philosophically naive, because it presupposes direct knowledge of reality, and/or a correspondence between reality and mental models. Knowledge is indirect. We know the world through mental models and mental processes. Our mental models do not correspond to what they represent, and they cannot be compared to reality.

When I see a tree, my brain creates a mental model of a tree. That model does not correspond to the tree. It is a completely different type of thing. It represents the tree, to me. The model is generated by applying an abstract concept to the current data of my senses. That abstract concept was abstracted from past experience. It reflects the order of reality, but not in a mind-independent way. It reflects correlations between sensory, emotional and motor data (what I call “semex”). The concept is about trees and how they relate to me.

We cannot compare our models to reality. Our brains judge a model to be truthful based on its ability to compress/predict experience. The use of a particular model in a particular situation is a judgment made by the brain. Truth judgments are made by brains. They are tied to the perspective of the subject. There is no subject-independent way to make a truth judgment, or to model reality.

In ordinary life, we take ordinary methods of establishing truth for granted. If I see a tree, that is considered adequate evidence of the tree’s existence, for me and for anyone else. Because we have similar brains, we tend to make roughly the same truth judgments in the same situations. So, in ordinary life we can take truth for granted, most of the time.

But in philosophy and psychology, we can't take truth for granted, because we can't take our minds/brains for granted. In philosophy and psychology, it is a very deep question how I know that a tree exists when I see it.

## 4 Value is Subjective

Value judgments, like truth judgments, are made by brains, and are tied to the perspective of a subject. But value is also subjective in another way. Truth judgments are about objective reality. Value judgments are not about objective reality. Value judgments are about the subject's orientation/attitude toward existing or hypothetical events.

Our brains use value to make choices of action. We act toward what we positively value, and away from what we negatively value. (See *What is Value?*.) Value is built into conceptual knowledge, and value judgments are generated by the application of concepts to situations. Our mental models are not just about reality. They also represent values and potential actions. If I see a \$20 bill lying on the sidewalk, that perception will generate a value judgment that it would be good to have the money, and it will also generate the response of picking up the money. This happens rapidly and subconsciously, just by applying a concept to the situation.

The positive value of money to me is not an objective property of money. It is my orientation toward money: that I positively value having it. Unlike truth, value is not convergent for similar brains. Tom and Joe could have identical brains, but make very different value judgments from their perspectives. For example, suppose that Joe and Tom both want to date Sally. Their value judgments are identical in one way, but opposite in another way. Joe positively values Joe dating Sally, and negatively values Tom dating Sally. Tom positively values Tom dating Sally, and negatively values Joe dating Sally.

Apparently, some people believe that they are perceiving objective value when they make value judgments. This seems utterly absurd to me. I don't know how anyone could be so confused.

See *Talking to Different T* for an example of someone who can't grasp subjectivity.

## 5 Intersubjectivity

Some things (in fact many things) exist as an agreement between brains. These things are intersubjective. They depend on many subjects, not just one.

Language is a good example. The English language exists in a distributed way, in the brains of English speakers. It is part of culture. The word "dog" means what it means because English speakers map it to the same concept in their brains. A language is a system of knowledge that is shared by multiple brains, and that makes it a communication medium.

Money is another example. What makes money valuable is that people believe it has value. If people stopped viewing money as valuable, then it would no longer be valuable. The value of money exists intersubjectively.

Norms of behavior, such as politeness, are another example. In Japan, it is polite to bow when meeting someone. In America, it is polite to look into their eyes and shake their hand. These behaviors are polite because people view them as polite. There is no objective standard of politeness, just different cultural standards.

Moral values are intersubjective. People naturally create collective values that solve social problems. Moral imperatives, such as “Do not murder”, “Do not rape”, “Do not steal”, etc, are not commandments from God, nor are they derived from logic, nor are they built into human nature. They are social rules that make societies work. People naturally discover these rules, and impose them on each other. Once these rules become established norms, people take them for granted and often view them as cosmic imperatives that come from God or some other universal source.

See What is Morality?.

If something is intersubjective, it depends on a collective, not a single individual.

## **6 Subjectivity is not Random or Arbitrary**

Some people believe that calling X “subjective” means that X is random, arbitrary or meaningless. This belief is always combined with a belief in objective truth and value. They believe that truth and value claims should be objective, and if they are not, then they can and should be dismissed.

This view is based on the naive correspondence theory of truth and value: that a truth claim is correct if it corresponds to objective truth, and a value claim is correct if it corresponds to objective value. Calling a claim “subjective” thus implies that it does not correspond to objective reality or is not about objective reality.

But no truth or value claim corresponds to objective reality. Truth claims are about objective reality, but there is no way to objectively verify or falsify them. We subjectively verify or falsify them, from our own perspectives, based on the data we have available to us, and using the mental abilities that we possess. Value claims are not about objective reality. They could refer to implicit or explicit intersubjective norms, or they could be personal judgments that are relative to an individual.

The subjectivity of truth and value does not mean that they are random or arbitrary. It means they are perspective-dependent. That perspective is not random. You could call them “arbitrary” in the sense that they are judgments, and the subject is the judge (arbiter). But truth and value judgments are not arbitrary in the sense of being whimsical.

Truth and value judgments are based on underlying norms of truth and value that are built into our natures.

If I look out my window, I will perceive a tree, not a pink elephant or a seven-headed pig. That perception is regular, not random. It is generated by a mental process that evolved to work in a certain way. That process applies conceptual knowledge to the data of my senses. The conceptual knowledge was induced from past experience by another evolved mental process. The data of my senses are not random. Sense organs evolved to convey information about objective reality to my brain. So, the perception is far from random or whimsical. It depends on my brain and objective reality in regular ways.

“Subjective” does not mean “independent of objective reality”. Truth judgments depend on both the subject and the object, and the subject is not a random decision generator. The subject has a nature, which is regular and stable, and which was generated by evolution.

Value judgments are about reality in that we judge objective outcomes to be good or bad. But the goodness or badness (the value) comes from us, and it is not a judgment about what is out there. We project value onto objective reality through the medium of ideas.

My value judgments are arbitrary in the sense that I am the arbiter. They are regular, not random. They are based on an underlying norm of value, which is built into my brain. Emotions are the ultimate source of psychological normativity, and they derive their normativity from biology, via evolution. The ultimate source of value is the biological purpose of reproduction. Our ordinary value judgments are an indirect, heuristic reflection of that purpose.

So, value judgments are not independent of reality, although their value content comes from the valuer, not from what is valued. And value judgments are based on psychological norms that evolved to be instrumental to reproduction. Value has a biological function, and value judgments can be judged themselves relative to that function.

Collective values, such as “Murder is bad”, have a social function. They are regular, not random. Understanding that collective values are intersubjective does not make them meaningless. We are not ruled by cosmic values that emanate from God. We impose rules and norms on each other.

## **7 Subjectivity and Nihilism**

Now, I need to address the non-existent pink elephant in the room: nihilism.

Most people assume that their beliefs and choices have an objective basis of some kind. They have never thought about it. They just assume that there is some way to objectively justify their beliefs and choices. They take for granted the existence of objective truth and value. They believe in cosmic good and evil, and a cosmic imperative to be good, not evil.

Of course, this is all delusion. It is naive.

A few people start thinking philosophically and psychologically about themselves: about truth, value, knowledge of reality, the source of morality, etc. They start questioning their naive assumptions. They eventually discover, after a long search, that there is no objective basis for beliefs and choices. They go looking for an objective foundation, but instead discover the abyss.

This is a process of disillusionment. It destroys the illusion that you have a foundation. It annihilates the illusion of objectivity.

I call this state of disillusionment (and enlightenment) “nihilism”. It is the philosophical condition that exists after you have discovered the abyss.

Few go down this path. Of those that do, many get stuck at this point. They view the absence of a foundation as an irresolvable problem. It seems to render their beliefs and choices meaningless, and life absurd.

But that is because they still have an unquestioned assumption: foundationalism. They assume that meaning requires a foundation. They assume that truth and value must be objective, not subjective. But this is just another assumption/illusion. Meaning, truth and value are necessarily subjective, not objective. Meaning can only exist from a subjective perspective, and you are a subject. So, meaning, truth and value exist from your perspective.

Accepting our subjectivity requires a sort of Copernican revolution.

We can imagine looking “down” at the solar system from “above”, and seeing the Earth rotating and moving around the Sun. We can understand that the daily movement of the Sun across the sky exists within the perspective of the observer on the Earth.

Likewise, we can adopt a cosmic perspective imaginatively, and from that perspective there is no meaning, truth or value. Adopting that perspective allows us to understand that meaning, truth and value are tied to a subjective perspective.

That is what the nihilist does. Life seems absurd from this imaginary cosmic perspective. The nihilist looks at himself from “above”, and sees a machine whose motions have no cosmic significance. This conflicts with his natural feeling that his choices are important, and that he is important.

But this cosmic perspective is not the “right” perspective. It is just a perspective that we can adopt, imaginatively and philosophically. It allows us to better understand ourselves. But even this imaginary cosmic perspective is still subjective, because we adopt it. There is no objective cosmic perspective.

We are subjects. Meaning, truth and value exist to us.