

Subjective Vs. Objective

The human being is Subject, and all of the contents of its thoughts and sensations are its Objects. And so in one sense, “subjective” is anything that pertains to the Subject, to the human being as agent in and interpreter of the real world, and “objective” is anything that pertains to the Objects, to the real world as cognized by human beings. Thus we can say that anything in the world of beliefs and opinions—anything tied up with “the human element”—is subjective, while the real world—the world of facts—is what is objective. This understanding of the terms is often put in a rather unhelpful if snappy way by saying that ‘objective’ is synonymous with ‘fact’, and ‘subjective’ synonymous with ‘opinion’.

There are other uses of these terms. We often exhort one another to “be objective” and accuse one another of “being subjective”. Here the difference between the two seems to be a matter of making a judgment based only on the facts (“objective”) vs. making a judgment based on bias or personal passion (“subjective”). And of course being objective, in this sense, is to be preferred to being subjective.

But philosophers want sometimes to use a somewhat more precise sense of these terms. Consider again the identifications of the subjective with opinion and of the objective with fact. Here’s why I said this was unhelpful: Is it a *fact* that, say, $2 + 2 = 4$, or is it merely your *opinion* that $2 + 2 = 4$? I think what we want to say here is: both! To have an opinion that $2 + 2 = 4$ is, at least in part, *to take $2 + 2 = 4$ to be a fact*. And so already the line between the subjective and the objective is blurry. Often, indeed, the whole point of having opinions is to try to match them to the facts.

Consider also more controversial judgments, about, say, the morality of prostitution or about the aesthetic quality of Jackson Pollock’s works. If someone takes Pollock’s paintings to be beautiful, are we dealing here only with her opinion, or might there also be some fact of the matter one way or the other about Pollock’s paintings?

These are difficult issues, and of course they cannot be resolved merely by adapting some new, precise terminology. Nevertheless, more technical definitions of the key words ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ can help distinguish the genuinely philosophical wheat from the merely obfuscatory chaff. Consider, then, the following definitions:

*A claim is **subjective** just in case its truth depends on people’s beliefs about it.*

*A claim is otherwise **objective**. That is, a claim is **objective** just in case its truth does not depend on people’s beliefs about it.*

The key idea here is to sharpen the sense in which the subjective relates to people’s opinions, and we have done that by saying that a claim is subjective when people’s opinions about it are relevant to *the determination of that claim’s truth*.

Normally, people's opinions about something are *not* relevant to whether that something is true or false. The sun has a mass greater than 100 grams, for example, and no tinkering with people's opinions about it will change that fact. Even if, that is, you were somehow able to convince everyone on Earth that in fact the sun's mass were no greater than 100 grams, still the sun's mass would remain greater than 100 grams. It is precisely this *independence* from people's beliefs that makes claims about the mass of the sun *objective*, in our new and improved sense.

Consider, by contrast, a claim like "Max is a cute dog." It would be odd to insist that this claim is true (or false) *regardless* of what anyone may believe. Much more natural is to say that whether Max is a cute dog does indeed depend on our beliefs. If there are people around who believe that Max is a cute dog, then "Max is a cute dog" will count as true; if there are not people around who believe that Max is a cute dog, then "Max is a cute dog" will count as false. There seems, that is, to be no "extra-mental reality" to the question of Max's cuteness. And it is precisely this *dependence* on people's beliefs that makes claims about Max's cuteness *subjective*, in our new and improved sense.

Caution: It is important to retain the clause in the definition of 'subjective' that limits people's beliefs to being about the very claim in question. That is: A claim counts as subjective when its truth depends on people's beliefs *about it itself*. A claim like "No one believes that the Earth is flat anymore" depends for its truth, of course, on what people believe. But it depends *not* on people's beliefs about **whether anyone any longer believes that the Earth is flat** but rather on people's beliefs about **whether the Earth is flat**. And so "No one believes that the Earth is flat anymore," even though it does depend on people's beliefs for its truth, is objective and not subjective.