

36. Subjectivity versus Objectivity

Our culture exhibits confusion and conflict over the value of objectivity versus the value of subjectivity, and between objective and subjective values and perspectives.

Objectivity is the limited realm of science, which ignores and is often at least suspicious of subjectivity. The objective realm is constrained to what is externally observable by all, measurable, reproducible, rational, logical, factual, or constructed logically and rationally from facts, mathematically describable, and ideally not influenced by what anyone thinks or feels. Subjectivity is the internal realm of emotion, feeling, creative expression, meaning, wisdom, dreams, spirituality, values and personal experience.

Scientific objectivity has produced outstanding results: technologies and other applications of science that make airplanes and spaceships fly; cars and trains go; cameras, TV, radio and computers; machines; phones and the Internet; tools; heating, cooling and electrical systems; medicines; telescopes and microscopes; and the meticulous and unforgiving languages of mathematics, which allows us to communicate with such precision that we can recreate exactly physical things made by others.

Philosophical, psychological, emotional and spiritual subjectivity provide life's internal experiences: personal feelings and energetic experiences, like love, anger, joy, fear, resentment, hate and happiness; motivations, like desire, disgust, inspiration and dreams; values, like fairness, freedom and honesty; perceptions, like beauty, ugliness, peace, harmony, melody, discomfort and comfort; relative sensations, like pain, pleasure, hot, cold, soft and hard; creative experiences, like imagination, music and art; philosophical thoughts, like meaning, wisdom, morality and purpose; and spiritual experiences, like connection, raised consciousness, awareness, visions, higher energies, awe and compassion.

Objective science has given us powerful abilities. Subjective experience teaches us wisdom in their use. Objective science has given us the ability to use nuclear weapons to destroy essentially all life on Earth. Subjective wisdom, hopefully, provides the restraint not to do that. Objective science gives us the ability to measure time with incredible exactness. Subjective surrender allows us to experience ten minutes as if it were an hour of agony, or to experience an hour passing in what feels like ten minutes of joy.

Both are important. Wisdom and restraint are becoming more important, as the impacts of applied sciences become more extensive. We need at least balance between them.

There are inherent dangers in allowing objective scientific achievements to advance ahead of wisdom in how to use them. We make mistakes. Often, we do not understand implications or repercussions of scientific advances until enough time has passed to observe and integrate them. We tweak biology, use chemicals or pharmaceuticals, or deploy other technologies, and only much later realize how that really affects health or natural systems, often negatively. At least some scientific claims are refuted with time, like so many false claims about diet on health. Some people tend to have a blind faith that science will be able to solve any problem it creates: we can go ahead and destroy the climate to make money now, and some gear-head will find a heroic fix at the last minute. That is faith in science, which is little different from religious faith science often disdains.

Champions of objective science tend to reject or ignore subjective realms, often disparaging them as namby-pamby, touchy-feely weaknesses unworthy of higher minds. Champions of subjective realms often resist or reject scientific results as cold, unfeeling, or disrespectful of religious or spiritual truth.

Battles are fought between religion and science, creationism and evolution, intuition and reason, and other aspects of subjectivity versus other aspects of objectivity.

That is OK if the processes are respectful and the outcome is balance or resolution between them, but the vehemence and closed-mindedness on both sides is alienating and creates unhealthy social tension. These are not either/or conflicts. Both exist, no matter what anyone thinks or says. Both are important.

Scientific objectivity has intentionally and artificially constrained itself to the externally measurable, mostly physical, reproducible and verifiable, because the scientific method generally only works within those artificial constraints, where math can be used. Science bumps into the border between objective and subjective sometimes, as in quantum mechanics' objective observations that the observer affects the observed. Good. Scientists need to remember the border around their endeavors is artificial, and the importance of subjectivity. Without a subjective observer, who cares about anything science does? Nobody. Without a subjective observer, what is the meaning of anything science does? There is none. Without a subjective observer, who experiences the benefits of scientific invention? No one.

It is understandable if champions of subjective experience and thought, like religious, philosophical and spiritual people, resent it when their areas, which humans truly and personally experience as important and meaningful, are omitted, ignored and pooh-poohed by science. When deep beliefs are put down, not because they are not true, but because science does not even consider them worthy of attention, that can be perceived as insulting. But, there is no denying the many benefits and advantages scientific exploration and invention have created in modern lives. Do we really want to live without light at night? Do we want to walk everywhere we go all the time? Do we want to be limited to communicating with only those we're physically present with? For most us, the answer is no.

We need balance and respect between these two sides of the same coin, as in all dimensions of duality. One is not better than the other. They are what they are, with their various strengths and weaknesses. Give us the real-world advantages of the applications of science, but please do not let us have them without the respect, humility and wisdom to develop and use them without doing harm! We need both.

Whether something can be exploited for money is one way to establish one kind of value, but something can be extremely valuable, subjectively, without being able to convert into money, like feelings of love. Some things can be counted, ranked and valued by ordering, like which physical effort produces the most physical output. Some cannot, like whether one person's beliefs provide more satisfaction and fulfillment than others' beliefs. We need balance and respect between objective and subjective values, and we need to respect and allow different subjective values. Subjective is as important as objective. Philosophy, spirituality, arts and wisdom deserve respect, as well as science and technology. Balance.