

Objective fact or experience?

“[...] what observers see, the subjective experience that they undergo, when viewing an object or scene is not determined solely by the images on their retinas but depends also on the experience, knowledge and expectations of the observer.”

The quote above, by Alan F. Chalmers, challenges the idea of objectivity. The objectivity in question is our ability to have a unified perception of something we see or experience. Chalmers' statement describes the idea that every individual's perception of the things around them is also influenced by other factors outside of our senses. We do not only experience something through our eyes and ears, but our upbringing, ideological beliefs and other subjective factors also play a deciding part in how we perceive it. If this is the case, can there be objective facts, and how can we conclude on them?

Initially, I want to mention art. I will use the portrait, painted by Velazquez, of Pope Innocent X as an example. I see a powerful man in a low-lit room with the light shining over him, and I think maybe the dark presence behind him, or the way the light shines over him symbolizes God's presence and Pope Innocent X's close relation with God. In contrary to my perception, the artist Francis Bacon depicts the Pope as an almost demonic figure, using strong and saturated colours in his depiction of the painting. Although Francis Bacon and I have seen the same picture, our perceptions are very different. Most of my relatives live in Spain, a catholic country, with a lot of catholic culture which I have been exposed to through my entire upbringing. Francis Bacon was an atheist and an openly homosexual through the twentieth century. And as Chalmers said in the quote, even though the painting is the same image on our retinas, my relationship with conservative Catholics is far different from Francis Bacon's, which alters our perception of the painting and what we associate the painting with. While art is often subject to interpretation, I believe this correlates to everything in life. When I see it is raining, I focus on the grey clouds and my clothes getting wet, while a botanist associates it with his garden flourishing.

Though paintings and rain are physical things, I believe the same principles can be used for concepts. Relativism is based on the belief that there are no objective facts, it all depends on context and what angle you look at it from. If we use a statement such as “dictatorship is bad” as an example. Modern society would say that dictatorship is bad because we want a free democracy where the public's opinion is important. In this instance democracy could be seen as an objective perception of an ideal form of government. However, a relativist may argue that in the context of war there are many examples of the parliament giving the reigning government full control to act quicker in times where efficiency is vital, for example “Elverumspakten”. The point I am trying to make is that although a vast majority of people perceive democracy as a basic human right, there are situations where the public would rather let the government take full

control. In this instance, the ideal form of government in spring 1940, is not the same as present time, therefore I believe we cannot have an objective perception of ideal form of government, because it can always change due to different contexts.

However, the idea of no objective perceptions struggles when discussing things such as mathematics. There is no debate if $2+2=4$ or $5 \times 5=25$, because theoretical maths is infinite and will always exist. My original thought was that if you give an eight-year-old an advanced mathematical equation, the reasoning and perception will be very different from that of a mathematician. You could argue that the contrast in perceptions may prove that even mathematics can be relative, because their circumstances and knowledge give the mathematician the upper hand in solving the problem. The weakness to this argument is that the eight-year-old cannot fully perceive the equation without understanding what he has been told to solve. The same implies for the relative opinion of democracy from earlier, because that argument only suffices if both sides understand how the two forms of government will affect their lives. The key word to defend Charmers point is “experience”, because how we perceive and reason in solving the mathematical equation may vary. Although we might conclude with the same answer, the way we perceive the different parts of the equation in our heads and what formulas we use depends on how we were taught and how our thought process works. While it is hard to prove the answer to an equation can be relative, because mathematics is a subject of right and wrong, I would argue that the perception and reasoning of the equation may not be objective, therefore Charmers quote would still be accurate.

Many philosophers over the years have tried to find an answer on how to conclude on certain objective truths. Rationalists and empirics not agreeing on whether our thoughts or senses was the key to objectivity. Descartes told us that our senses deceit us, so we should find the truth from within our own rational thinking. While on the contrary, Hume would say all our thoughts came from experiences and things we had sensed. On the other hand, Hannah Arendt had a theory that it was not possible to conclude on an objective fact, because we would always be influenced by our surroundings and experiences. The idea behind Arendt’s theory is that everyone perceives the world differently because of their experiences and background, and this creates a problem when trying to find an objective truth. The concept of being innocent until proven guilty is a great example, because if you start off with a supposition, it is easier to overlook certain clues or other suspects because of a “tunnel vision” directing you towards answer you wanted. The same implies when solving greater problems, because Arendt believes that we unconsciously draw conclusions based on our background, or “experience, knowledge and expectation” as Chambers would put it.

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In conclusion, I believe that there are possibilities for objective facts, such as in a mathematical equation. However, when discussing objective experiences, as Chambers does in the quote, I do not believe we experience things in the same way. Our prior experiences and beliefs play a vital role in how we perceive the world, on any level of importance. If it is not possible to leave prior experiences out of the equation when concluding or resolving a question, then it is also impossible to come to an objective answer.