

# Objective Facts

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*“Every person's head is a world unto itself”.*

My wife said this to me the other day. Many people believe in the existence of 'objective' knowledge, sometimes called 'objective truth', 'objective reality' or 'objective facts'. Fewer realize that their interpretation of this knowledge is not the objective knowledge itself, and that their interpretation of so-called 'facts' will often differ from the interpretations others make of these 'same objective facts'.

No two people can have identical worldviews, and the history of science demonstrates that sometimes our most reliably solid facts eventually become outdated, left behind, and reformulated. It also demonstrates that sometimes the most empirically demonstrable facts meet with the fiercest resistance from those who are apparently the most highly trained and therefore, we are supposed to believe, the most highly 'qualified' to recognize them and respect their veracity.

Sometimes, the apparent facts are not what we want. They are not what we want the truth to look like. They might create an influence unfavorable to our personal goals and desires. Sometimes the facts, when accepted and embraced, can force us to change our opinions, our worldviews, our aims, perhaps some of our basic decisions.

Those who are formally untrained in evaluating the facts, typically seem happiest 'waiting for the dust to settle'. They wait for the experts to sort out the facts. Yet if we have to wait for experts to tell us what the facts are, then what does it mean when we claim that 'the facts' can be 'objectively verified' by empirical observation? Do we need controlled trials with lots of people doing extended experimentation for many years, before we can observe what's so?

The experts don't do this. We count on them to have opinions in advance, on the basis of what they've studied about the past. And the studies of experts are often extremely narrow in scope, highly specialized, so their ability to appreciate the wider context or 'the bigger picture' is typically sharply curtailed. The confining rigor of an advanced degree tends to ensure a certain tunnel vision. The effort required to jump through all the necessary hoops, typically cuts way down on the time and energy available for wide-ranging explorations based on personal curiosity and passionate interest. Exceptions to this general trend, so far as I can tell, remain extremely rare.

Furthermore, what does it mean when the experts don't agree as to what the facts are? And where do the facts of my own personal experience fit into this 'objective truth'? Anywhere? Aren't I myself an empirical observer? Objective facts are supposedly those that can be witnessed by nearly anyone, any minimally competent observer.

We claim it to be an objective fact that ten feet in front of us sits a chair. Then we walk ahead to it, put our backside down upon it, and presto, objective proof! We have verified the existence of the objective fact of the chair by sitting on it. I have an observation (I see a chair), I have a theory (I believe it's hard and solid), I perform an experiment (I go to sit on it), I examine the results for proof (it holds me up). If we fall to the floor when we try to sit on it, then we have some other considerations to contend with...

This procedure is obviously not 'rigorously' scientific, but it is informed by a scientific attitude of understanding that respects key distinctions between theoretical possibilities and empirical verifications. Most of us orient like this routinely in the course of an average day.

I have an observation (I see a sandwich), I have a theory (it looks delicious and like it's probably worth the price), I perform an experiment (I buy it and taste it), I examine the results for proof (it tastes great so I eat the whole thing). If it tastes terrible when we try to eat it, then we have some other considerations to contend with...

Certain things in the outer world, like chairs we can sit on, can be demonstrated to others. If we could sit on the chair and if it held us up, we could demonstrate the 'objective fact' that it will hold others up, by having them come over to the chair and sitting on it just like we did. Someone particularly big and heavy might disprove the theory that the chair could hold 'any' person up, yet not disprove the theory that the chair is hard and solid, even if it eventually collapsed.

Other situations lead to different 'subjective' and 'objective' facts and the guy who made our sandwich may genuinely believe it tastes wonderful even if we find it tastes terrible. He will also typically succeed in finding others who agree with him. So, our measure of how delicious the sandwich tastes, does not qualify as a true 'objective fact', the same for all observers.

The sandwich did possess a certain look, weight and size we could verify with observation and agree about or demonstrate to others. Some 'objective facts' do apparently exist, and we have an ability to become aware of them to some degree. Our interpretations of these facts, however, our internal 'subjective' or personal conclusions, are not these 'objective facts' themselves. They are inner convictions that we verify directly by the uniquely individual, personal experiences that exist inside our skins rather than outside of them.

'Objective facts' are supposedly those facts that exist outside our skins, the same for all observers. For example, no matter how high I jump off the ground, I will quickly fall right back down to the ground, without some external support. The same holds true for all people who jump up off the ground and this can be demonstrated to others. If there are exceptions to this I'd like to meet them.

Our personal philosophies, interpretations and enlightened perspectives, no matter how fully they may be based on the latest, most highly scientific assumptions, are not the facts themselves. So to convince others that our views are sound, we must lead them to evaluate the key evidence, the pivotal so-called 'objective facts' we have found, for themselves.

Many others may reach the same conclusions we have, by examining the same 'objective facts' that led us to our own fact-based conclusions. Many others, however, may reach very different conclusions. I have witnessed this happen repeatedly, even with people in my own family and with professional colleagues I've worked with closely.

Our differing worldviews force us to interpret and value things differently. One person sees an opportunity where another foresees a threat, one sees a reason to make an announcement where another sees an imperative to keep silent, one sees a reason to advance where another sees grounds to withdraw. Our conclusions, then, no matter how much we believe they follow inevitably from the evidence, are not 'objective facts'. Many people lose sight of this distinction

between outer facts and inner convictions, or willfully brush it aside to suit their purposes or to preserve their beliefs.

If we bring other people to view the evidence that shaped our own conclusions, allowing them to develop their own possibly-differing conclusions, they may at least include the important factual evidence we want them to know about in their evaluations.

You may worry that other people don't have the requisite character and humanity to reach the conclusions you feel they should, yet in the cases where you're right about this, pushing your conclusions on them won't improve their character or enhance their humanity anyway.

Let's assume as an objective fact that five people in a room together can quickly agree there's a red wagon in the room with them. They can easily agree it's a wagon, that it's painted red, that it has four wheels and a handle you can pull it with. It has the words '*Little Red Wagon*' written on both sides in white letters. These are pretty clear 'objective facts'.

If we want to buy the red wagon, we might notice that it's old, that it's rusting in certain places, that it squeaks when it rolls, that one of the wheels is a bit loose, and that we should offer as little money as possible for it because it has all these 'objectively verifiable' characteristics that 'obviously' diminish it's value.

If we want to sell the nearly-antique red wagon, we can point out it's authentic patina indicating it was one of the first red wagons ever produced, it has this serial number printed on it indicating it was one of the first one hundred wagons made by Ye Olde Wagon Company in the USA, it's got all it's original wheels, most of its original paint, plus you have the original bill of sale. All it needs is a spot of oil and it's a collector's item.

If we want to use the red wagon to haul a load of books to the truck waiting at the end of a long driveway, we'll test to see how strong it feels and how smoothly and solidly it rolls with a little weight in it, how much it shakes and rattles, how much confidence we have we can fill it with our books and they won't spill out in transit.

If the red wagon is piled high with books and it rolls directly over your foot, your attention will likely be filled with an entirely different set of 'objective facts'.

Claiming it is worth \$10 or \$500, that it is ugly, or beautiful, needs to be painted, should never be painted, or that you can sell it for more in five years, these assertions are not statements of objective facts. These things cannot be proven or empirically verified to people with widely differing agendas. Clearly determining 'the objective facts' is not so clear-cut and straightforward as some people of great conviction often contend.

Sometimes others' differing conclusions may throw additional light on our own, or from time to time outshine them. Is our intention in sharing 'the facts' with others to convert them to our way of viewing things, or to communicate with them and to broaden their frames of reference so they can reach better, more well-informed conclusions of their own? This typically depends on the context of our communications and our agenda in the moment.

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