

Objectivity as a Normative Notion

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I will argue that objectivity is a normative notion. By this I don't mean that objectivity *has* normative qualities such as being valuable or worth striving for. That may be true, but it's not the claim defended here. Rather, the claim is that normativity is part of *what objectivity is*. When we analyze objectivity, we'll find normativity built into it.

Moreover, we'll find *primitive* normativity—a normative property that is not identical or reducible to natural facts about the cosmos, or even super-natural facts about God and the divine (if there are such things). This is what so-called “normative non-naturalists” believe all normative properties are like. But putting aside their general view about normativity writ large, my claim here is just that objectivity, at least, consists in primitive normativity.

Now, I personally don't think there is any such thing as primitive normativity.¹ So for me, the upshot is that there is no such thing as objectivity either. But your mileage may vary: if you're wedded to objectivity, the upshot is that you're wedded to primitive normativity too.

1. Points of view

Let me begin by characterizing the phenomenon of objectivity to be analyzed. Its contrast, of course, is subjectivity. As a starting point, I understand something to be subjective if it depends on one's point of view, and objective if it is independent of any particular point of view.

Some examples may help. From where I sit at the dinner table, the salt is to the right of the pepper. That's how they're arranged *from my point of view*. From your perspective, opposite me, the pepper is to the right of the salt. So, which is to the right of which is subjective—it depends on one's point of view. Or suppose I bite into some asparagus and find it tasty. That's how it is *for me*. But you find asparagus is disgusting—that's how it is *for you*. Again, whether asparagus is tasty is subjective: it depends on one's palate.

By contrast, suppose I see a quadrilateral with equal sides and equal angles. It is a square. This is objective because it does not depend on my point of view. If you measure it, you'll find that it's a square too—assuming you measure correctly, of course. But, to be clear, the phenomena I have in mind is not objectivity of *method*. It is sometimes said that scientists should evaluate evidence “impartially”, without letting their personal values interfere, and this is a demand for objectivity in one sense of the term.² But it's not the sense I'm interested in. Even if your personal values influence how you measure the square, its *being a square* does not depend on those values.

I should say that in offering these examples I don't mean to imply that they are uncontroversial—one might try arguing that being tasty is objective matter, for instance. The

¹ I argued as much in Dasgupta (2016); see also Dasgupta (manuscript a) for related arguments.

² This is sometimes known as the “value-free ideal”; see Lackey (1999) for discussion. For a more skeptical take on this ideal, see Longino (1990) and (1995).

point is just to illustrate the *sense* of objectivity and subjectivity I'm interested in, with plausible-enough claims about each case.³

It will help to regiment some terms of the discussion. First, when we say that something is subjective (or objective), what is the "something"? In the case of taste, is it the *property* of being tasty that's subjective? Or the *proposition* that asparagus is tasty? Or my *belief* that asparagus is tasty? Or the *sentence* "Asparagus is tasty"? None of these are quite right. If taste is subjective, it follows on some conceptions of properties and propositions that there is no such thing as the property of being tasty, or the proposition that asparagus is tasty—nor, if belief is a relation to a proposition, any belief to that effect either.⁴ To talk in these terms, then, would involve theoretical commitments which I'd like to bracket here. For this reason one might be tempted to focus on sentences, but this seems artificial: surely the phenomena of subjectivity runs deeper than language. Subjectivity is intuitively a feature of one's *conception* or *view* of the world; yet sentences don't have a *view* on anything (they're just worldly bits and pieces).⁵

There is no entirely neutral way to proceed, but I'll try to be as ecumenical as possible. To this end I'll say that it is *judgments* that are subjective or objective. Thus, when I bite into asparagus and think that it's tasty, this counts as a judgment as I'll use the term. I'll represent judgments in bold, e.g. as

(1) **Asparagus is tasty.**

This is a mental state I'd naturally verbalize by saying "Asparagus is tasty", but beyond that I leave open the nature of the state. It may be propositional, but it need not be. It may be cognitive, but (again) it need not be—judgments can have non-cognitive elements. Thus, consider a simple expressivist view on which saying "Charity is good" expresses a pro-attitude towards charity. Intuitively, one can also *judge* that charity is good, where (on this view) that would be a *mental* "expression" of the same pro-attitude. In this case the judgment would be non-cognitive, but a judgment nonetheless. In the spirit of ecumenicism I offer no theory of judgments here; it suffices to point at the kind of state I have in mind and I trust you can find them in your own mental life. Indeed, I'll assume that we can identify these mental states across people. Thus, I can judge that asparagus is tasty *and you can judge the very same thing*—just imagine the mental state *you'd* verbalize by saying "Asparagus is tasty". The bold notation, therefore, represents a judgment-*type*.

Second, when a judgment is subjective, what exactly is it that depends on one's point of view? Not the judgment itself. Even if you find asparagus disgusting, you can still judge (1)—you can think something you'd verbalize by saying "Asparagus is tasty". It would just be inaccurate... from your point of view, that is. It would not reflect *your* experience of eating asparagus. Thus, what depends on one's point of view is the *accuracy* of the judgement.

³ Indeed, in the case of shape I'm ignoring complications of special relativity, where shape becomes relative to a frame of reference. The more general example would be that *physical geometry* is objective, but even that is not uncontroversial: see Reichenbach (1957) for arguments to the contrary.

⁴ For example, consider the view that a property is a function from worlds to sets of objects. The property of being tasty, then, would be a function that maps the actual world to a set that either contains asparagus or not. But since asparagus is tasty *for me* but not *for you* (in one and the same world, the actual one), there appears to be no function for the property of being tasty to *be*. Likewise for the view that a proposition is a set of worlds.

⁵ As Thomas Nagel said "objectivity is a method of understanding. It is beliefs and attitudes that are objective in the primary sense. Only derivatively do we call objective the truths that can be arrive at in this way" (1986, p. 4.).

In the same spirit of ecumenicism I leave open what accuracy is, exactly. I'll use 'truth' as a synonym and say, equivalently, that the *truth* of the judgment depends on one's point of view. But don't project any particular *theory* of truth into this—ecumenicism requires that we freely apply this talk of truth to cognitive and non-cognitive judgments, and that we allow the details to differ markedly from case to case.

To illustrate, consider

(2) **The salt is to the right of the pepper.**

What does truth amount to here? An obvious suggestion is that a tokening of (2), by a thinker T, is true if and only if the salt is to the right of the pepper relative to T. On this approach it is judgment-*tokens* that are the primary bears of truth and falsity. If you prefer attributing truth to judgment-*types* directly, you could instead think of truth as a relation between judgment-type and thinker and construe the same condition as specifying when (2) is true *in relation to a thinker T*. (Thus, one and the same judgement-type can be true in relation to me but not in relation to you.) Either way, (2)'s truth would "depend on one's point of view" in the broad sense I have in mind.

Now consider the simple expressivist view on which the judgment

(3) **Charity is good**

is a "mental expression" of a pro-attitude towards charity. If I don't have this pro-attitude, I can still judge (3); it would just be inaccurate... from my point of view. It wouldn't reflect *my* conative mind-set, that is, though it would if I had the relevant pro-attitude. I'll therefore say that (3)'s accuracy—that is, its *truth*—also depends on one's point of view.

You might feel that this stretches the word "true": (2)'s truth was a matter of accurate *representation* (of the arrangement of salt and pepper), you might say, while (3)'s "truth" is a matter of accurate *expression* of a conative attitude.⁶ But remember that my talking this way is not so much a substantive assumption about *the nature of truth* (whatever that means) as it is a decision to use the word "true" to cover a variety of respects in which judgments can be assessed for accuracy, broadly construed. Moreover, the main point here could in principle be made in a more deflationary manner, without any mention of truth. Rather than saying that (2)'s truth depends on one's point of view, we could instead say that *whether the salt is to the right of the pepper* depends on one's point of view. Likewise, rather than calling (3) *true*, an expressivist could instead say "I think charity is good, but I recognize that this reflects something about my own conative state of mind." But I'll continue to talk of truth for ease of prose.

Note that the dependence of truth on a point of view does not imply relativism—at least, not the kind of relativism wherein differences in point of view resolve conflict. To be sure, there is relativism of this kind in the case of (2). Suppose you're sitting opposite me, and I judge (2) while you judge its negation. Then on the truth-conditions above (applied to judgment-tokens),

⁶ Indeed, you might further say that the difference between *expression* and *representation* is what distinguishes expressivism from "subjectivism", the view that in saying "Charity is good" I mean *that I have the pro-attitude towards charity*.

we can both agree that *my* token judgment is true, and *your* token judgment is also true, and there is no conflict because each token judgment has a different truth-condition.⁷ But (3) may differ in this regard. Suppose the relevant pro-attitude towards charity is a plan to promote charity in certain situations, where this is an impersonal plan of action for *anyone* in those situations, not just the thinker. Then if A has this pro-attitude and B does not, there may be conflict insofar as their plans are incompatible. In that case they cannot simply agree that (3) is true from A's point of view but not B's, and leave it at that. Their difference in point of view does not "relativize away" the conflict; it *is* their conflict.

As this discussion illustrates, there are numerous "semantic mechanisms" by which a judgment's truth might depend on a point of view in the broad sense I have in mind. What makes them all cases of *subjectivity* is that their truth reflects something that *the thinker* brings to the party (as it were). An *objective* judgment, then, is one whose truth reflects *the world* as it is independently of the thinker. As Daston and Galison put it, "to be objective is to aspire to knowledge that bears no trace of the knower" (2007, p. 17).

Finally, if subjectivity is dependence on a *point of view*, what exactly is a point of view? There is much variation. In the case of taste, my point of view is arguably something mental—e.g. the sensation I have when eating asparagus. But in the case of left and right, my point of view is just my spatial position. This is not a mental property; hence subjectivity is *not* the same as mind-dependence. Again, subjectivity arises when a judgment reflects something about *the judger*, be that a mental feature or a feature of some other kind.

In some cases, it could be a feature they have by virtue of being part of a community. Consider comedy. Whether something is funny presumably depends on our aesthetic sensibilities, i.e. whether it elicits laughter and so on. In this respect it's like being tasty. But a difference, you might think, is that cultural norms also play a role—they determine what kinds of jokes are appropriate, for example. (Perhaps this is why it makes sense to think "It made me laugh, I admit, but it's not funny", but harder to make sense of the thought "It tasted great to me, but it's not tasty.") If so, the relevant "point of view" when it comes to comedy would include the point of view *of a culture*.⁸ Since there is cross-cultural variation in sensibilities, a joke might be funny from *our* point of view but not from *theirs*.

In other cases, the relevant "point of view" could be a feature we have thanks to being *human*. Consider a response-dependence theory of color, on which being red is a matter of *looking red* to (statistically typical) human beings in certain conditions. On this view, whether something is red is subjective insofar as it depends on how we humans perceive it; our judgments about color therefore reflect *us humans* as much as they do the world. This is so even though there is no cross-cultural variation in the relevant "point of view".

Still, other creatures might perceive things very differently, in which case judgments of color would reflect *our human* point of view but not *theirs*. At the limit, a "point of view" could even be a feature constitutive of being a creature capable of *having* a view in the first place. I'll call this "Kantian" subjectivity for obvious reasons, but there may be no uncontroversial examples.

⁷ Much the same goes if we apply truth to judgment-types: we can agree that (2) is true *in relation to me* but not *in relation to you*, and again there is no conflict because truth is a relation to people and we are different people.

⁸ If you insist that a point of view must be a property of an individual, fine: just take the property of *being a member of a community with such-and-such comedic sensibilities*.

Perhaps conceiving of space as *Euclidean* is a necessary condition of perceiving or thinking about space. Or perhaps, as Korsgaard has argued, normative judgments are true in virtue of the constitutive nature of being a free agent capable of action.⁹ If so, these would count as subjective elements to thought even though there is no possibility of escaping them, so to speak.¹⁰

That completes my initial characterization of the phenomena. To be clear, I don't claim to have sharply defined when something "depends on a point of view". Many questions of detail remain. For instance, the truth of *any* judgment will depend (in part) on its content, so if its content depends on its role in the thinker's mental life then its truth will depend on the thinker at least to this extent. This alone shouldn't count as subjectivity, but exactly how to distinguish it from (say) the case of left and right is not straightforward. Still, my aim here was just to point at the phenomena I have in mind, not to sharply define it—indeed, in section 3 I'll argue that there may be no sharp line.

2. Alethic vs conceptual subjectivity

I said that subjective judgments reflect something about *us thinkers* as much as the world. So far I've discussed one way in which they do so, namely when their *truth* depends on one's point of view. I now want to suggest that there is a second way in which they can reflect something about us thinkers.

To see this, suppose you're watching a game of soccer. One team mounts an attack and the striker moves into space to receive a pass. But the referee stops play because the striker was "off-side", meaning that she was closer to the opponent's goal than the last defender when the pass was made. Now, being off-side is objective *in the sense discussed so far*: it depends just on the spatial arrangement of players, not on anyone's point of view. To be sure, the referee makes the call based on what she can see, so her position on the pitch may affect her *confidence* in the call. But much the same goes for any empirical judgment; the point is that the *truth* of the judgment

(4) The striker is off-side

depends just on the spatial arrangement of the players; the referee's perspective and tastes and preferences and such like have nothing to do with it.¹¹

⁹ She develops this idea in depth in (Korsgaard 1996). See (Korsgaard 2008) for a more succinct—and to my mind, more illuminating—way of getting at the idea.

¹⁰ This variety in what counts as a "point of view" illustrates that subjectivity and objectivity can come in degrees. As Thomas Nagel put it, "a view or form of thought is more objective than another if it relies less on the specifics of the individual's makeup and position in the world, or on the character of the particular type of creature he is" (1986, p. 5). Left and right depends on highly specific facts about one's spatial position, whereas color depends on human perceptual faculties; in this respect color is "more objective" than left and right.

¹¹ Sometimes a referee will call someone off-side when they weren't, and since the referee's call is final the striker will then be *recorded* as being off-side and play will continue *as if* the striker was off-side. This is a sense in which the issue is "depends on" the referee's call, but that's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about whether the striker was *in fact off-side*—the fact that there is room to think that the referee "made a mistake" shows that this is not the same thing.

Still, I suggest that there is a subjective element to the judgment nonetheless: it reflects something about us insofar as the off-side rule is something *we* invented in the first place! To see the point, compare the judgment

(5) **Electrons are negatively charged.**

Like (4), this is objective in the sense that its *truth* does not depend on one's point of view: whether electrons are negatively charged depends just on the physical properties of electrons. But unlike (4), you might think, its *subject matter* (or *content*) is also independent of us. The thought here is that electrons are a natural kind, a category that is "there anyway" whether we recognize it or not. Likewise, negative charge is a genuine attribute that electrons come equipped with "anyway", not an artificial condition that we invented. By contrast, being off-side *is* artificial in a sense: it's a condition that *we* defined in order to play a game *we* enjoy. This is a respect in which (5) is more objective than (4): it carves at *the world's own joints*, not joints that *we* put there.

That's the basic idea, but it needs sharpening. For you might object that properties are abundant—that there's a property for every set, one that all and only the members of the set possess. If so, it's not strictly true that being off-side is just something we defined. For the property corresponds to a certain set of events—namely, events in which a striker was closer to the opponent's goal than the last defender when the pass was made—and sets are "there anyway" regardless of whether we defined words for them. So on this conception of properties, which I'll grant for now, the contrast with electrons must be made somehow else.¹²

To this end, notice that we don't just evaluate judgments for *truth*; we also evaluate whether they use the *right concepts*. To illustrate, imagine two teams of geologists investigating gemstones. One team uses familiar concepts like "green" and "emerald" to structure their investigations—they ask questions and formulate hypotheses in those terms. The other team use Goodmanian alternatives like "grue" and "gremerald":

X is *grue* if and only if X is first observed before 2050 and green, or not first observed before 2050 and blue.

X is a *gremerald* if and only if X is first observed before 2050 and an emerald, or not first observed before 2050 and a sapphire.¹³

The first team reports that all emeralds are green, the second team reports that all gremeralds are grue. Both statements are *true*, notice, but there is something very odd about what the second team is up to: they're using the wrong concepts, focusing on the wrong properties.

This illustrates two respects in which a judgment can be evaluated. One respect is whether it's true; call this *alethic* evaluation. And a second respect is whether it uses the right concepts—or as I'll put it, whether it "fits". Call this *conceptual* evaluation. These respects of evaluation can vary independently. For example, the judgment

All gremeralds are grue

¹² We'll see in section 4 that this conception of properties makes no difference to my argument one way or another.

¹³ Goodman defines "grue" along these lines in his (1955); the concept of "gremerald" is defined here synergistically.

is true but it doesn't fit, while the judgment

No emerald is green

fits but isn't true.

Go back now to the referee's judgment (4), that the striker is off-side. This is true (let's suppose), but does it fit? That is, does it use the right concepts? Absolutely it does. To emphasize the point, note that the off-side rule has changed over the years. The rules of 1863 stated that a player was off-side if closer to the opponent's goal than the *second*-last defender, not the last defender; call this the off-side* rule. Thus, if the referee had instead judged

The striker is off-side*

this would *not* fit since it uses the wrong concept, one that goes with an outdated rule-book. But her judgment (4) about off-sides fits, and this very clearly reflects something about *us*. The current rules of soccer are what they are because *we* get a kick out of the resulting game—there is obviously no *human-independent* respect in which the off-side rule is superior to the off-side* rule!

This, I suggest, is the sense in which (4) is subjective. Even if the property of being off-side is “there anyway”, *per* the abundant conception of properties, there is no human-independent fact that distinguishes it over the property of being off-side* as the right one for the referee to think about. The fact that (4) fits therefore reflects something about us, not the world. It fits because *our* athletic abilities and sensibilities mean that the off-side rule works well *for us*. It fits because of our “athletic point of view”, so to speak.

The contrasting sense in which judgment (5) is objective, then, would be that it fits “because of the world”, not because of us. To be objective in this sense, it must be a human-independent fact—more generally, a *thinker*-independent fact—that being an electron and being negatively charged are the “right” respects by which to conceptualize the world. What kind of fact? There are numerous theories. According to a view associated with David Lewis and Ted Sider, a select few properties are distinguished as “perfectly natural” (or just “natural” for short).¹⁴ On another view, associated with David Armstrong, a select few properties correspond to universals.¹⁵ Other views pick out a select few properties in yet other ways, but what all these views have in common is that the properties thereby selected are distinguished as “the world's own joints”—categories that the world comes pre-packaged into. The idea, then, is that (5) is objective insofar as it is joint-carving.

We therefore have two dimensions of the contrast between subjectivity and objectivity, one for each respect in which judgments are evaluated. In the last section we looked at the contrast with respect to truth, which I'll call *alethic* subjectivity and objectivity:

¹⁴ The idea first appeared in Lewis's work in his (1983); Sider (2011) then developed and extended the idea significantly. Strictly speaking, Lewis left open three views about what *makes* a property natural, one of which had it that the natural properties are those that correspond to universals. On that view, Lewis's idea would collapse into the Armstrongian view mentioned later in this paragraph. But Lewis also left open the view that being natural is a primitive fact about a property, which is the view that Sider develops. By the Lewis-Sider view, this is what I mean.

¹⁵ See for example Armstrong (1978).

A judgment is *alethically* subjective if its *truth* depends on one's point of view.

A judgment is *alethically* objective if its *truth* is independent of any particular point of view.

And we just identified a second contrast with respect to fit, which I'll call *conceptual* subjectivity and objectivity. That is,

A judgment is *conceptually* subjective if its *fit* depends on one's point of view.

A judgment is *conceptually* objective if its *fit* is independent of any particular point of view (that is, if it is joint-carving).

Judgement (4) about off-sides is *alethically* objective because its truth depends just on the arrangement of players, not on one's point of view. But it is *conceptually* subjective because it fits in virtue of *our* athletic abilities and sensibilities.

Is this subjectivity in name only? You might think so, if only because discussions of subjectivity often emphasize the alethic sense: *whether asparagus is tasty* depends on one's palate, *whether a joke is funny* depends on one's aesthetic and cultural sensibilities, and so on. Conceptual subjectivity differs in this regard: *whether the striker is off-side* does not depend on one's point of view at all! But remember the philosophical significance of the objective-subjective distinction: it marks the extent to which our opinions reflect the world *as it is in itself*, as opposed to what *we* bring to the opinion. This significance should not be understated. I think *The Big Lebowski* is funny, but if I didn't appreciate the alethic subjectivity of this judgment I'd be under the impression that it reflects something "in the film anyway", separate from me. After all, it *is* funny (from my point of view), so if I don't recognize that *this is just my point of view* I will naturally assume that the humor resides wholly in the film, much as shape resides in a figure. This conception is then transformed when I realize that the humor is a function of how *we* react to it—a collaboration between the film, myself, and my cultural context. I gain a more accurate conception of the world and my place in it.

Conceptual subjectivity has much the same significance. Imagine someone naïve enough to think that off-sides is joint-carving. They'd be under the impression that soccer players in 1863 used the *wrong rule*, not because the current rule suits us better but because there are human-independent facts about which rules are right and which are wrong. They might even think that today's soccer is the One Right game in much the same way that a physical theory might be the One True physics! To play basketball, on their view, is to make the same kind of mistake as thinking that pigs fly: it's wrong because of how the world is. Their conception is then transformed when they realize that off-sides is not joint-carving after all. They come to see that the world itself has no preference between soccer and basketball; that the right game (if there is one) is simply the one that most excites *us*.

At the limit, imagine discovering that there are *no* joints at all. It follows that *everything we think* is colored by concepts that have no more basis in the world than off-sides. Even those judgments that are *true* independently of us are not unfettered presentations of the world as it is in itself, for they present the world through the lens of concepts that reflect *us* in some way. Perhaps these concepts suit some goal of ours, or perhaps make our lives better, or perhaps

they're simply ones we became habituated to. But whatever the details, there would be no possibility of seeing the world in its pure form, as it is *independently of us*. To change our conceptual scheme would just be to use new lenses tinted by new colors, not to remove the lenses altogether.¹⁶

For these reasons I believe that conceptual subjectivity is subjectivity proper. Likewise with conceptual objectivity. If the world has joints, then judgments that carve at those joints would reflect categories that the world comes pre-packaged into independently of us, not just categories presented by the lens of our parochial concepts. A conception of the world in these terms is, I think, what Bernard Williams meant by the "absolute conception", something he described as "a conception of the world that might be arrived at by any investigators, even if they were very different from us" (1985, p. 139).¹⁷ The fact that Williams associated the absolute conception with objectivity is further evidence that conceptual objectivity is not just objectivity in name only.

3. Self and world

I am now in a position to argue that objectivity is a normative notion, and irreducibly so. The argument rests on two premises. The first is that conceptual objectivity is primary, in the sense that without it there can be no alethic objectivity either. That is,

(A) Alethic objectivity requires conceptual objectivity.

And the second premise is that when we unpack the notion of conceptual objectivity, we'll find irreducible normativity built into it. That is,

(B) Conceptual objectivity is irreducibly normative.

It follows that objectivity *writ large*—both the alethic and conceptual varieties—is irreducibly normative. If there is no such thing as irreducible normativity, there is no such thing as objectivity either.

Start with premise (A). To be conceptually objective is to be joint-carving, so what (A) says is that for something to be alethically objective the world must *have* joints in the first place. The reason is simple. A judgment is alethically objective if its truth depends just on the world, not on us. But this presupposes a line between us and the world, and if there are no joints then that line itself has no significance apart from the fact that it's a line that *we* happen to draw. The line is conceptually subjective, that is, reflecting nothing more than our parochial conception of self and world. And this undermines the idea that the judgment is alethically objective in the first place. For the idea was supposed to be that the judgment's truth reflects *the world as it is in*

¹⁶ Compare Terence McKenna's remark that "what we call reality is in fact nothing more than a culturally sanctioned and linguistically reinforced hallucination".

¹⁷ As evidence, he said that the absolute conception would not include the judgment that grass is green, because "*green*, for certain, and probably *grass* are concepts that would not be available to every competent observer of the world" (p. 139). Note that this is different from saying that the judgment's *truth* depends on us; rather, his thought seems to be that the concept of green is unique to *our* perceptual faculties. If so, he's ruling the judgment out of the absolute conception on grounds of its *conceptual* subjectivity, not alethic subjectivity.

itself, free of any trace of the thinker; yet without joints, the very distinction between thinker and world is *itself* just a reflection of the thinker!

Three clarifications may help. First, the claim here is not that for the judgment to be alethically objective, it must also be conceptually objective. It's that *its being alethically objective* must be conceptually objective. To illustrate, consider again

(4) **The striker is off-side.**

This is alethically objective insofar as its truth depends just on the world, not on the thinker. But if the distinction between thinker and world isn't joint-carving, this claim to objectivity, i.e.

(4-AO) **(4) is alethically objective.**

is conceptually subjective. (4) is also conceptually subjective, of course, but there's a crucial difference. For the conceptual subjectivity of (4) does nothing to undermine (4) itself: it remains that the striker *is* off-side. Nor does it undermine (4-AO), for that matter, for it remains that (4) is true independently of anyone's point of view. But if (4-AO) is conceptually subjective, this *does* seem to undermine (4-AO) itself. For what (4-AO) says is that (4) is objective in the sense that its truth depends just on *the world*, not on us thinkers. And this may be so given the line *we happen to draw between us and world*. But if this isn't joint-carving, then the world is indifferent (as it were) between the line we happen to draw and other lines that extend or restrict the boundary in various ways. Relative to some of those lines, (4)'s truth *will* depend on us after all—not because of a change in what its truth consists in, but because of a change in what counts as *us*. And this, I claim, undermines the idea that (4) is objective in the first place: the idea was supposed to be that its truth reflects *the world* as it is independently of us, yet this idea collapses if the notion of “the world” *already* reflects us. In slogan: if something is objective, it must be objective that it's objective.¹⁸

Second, the claim here is not that without joints, the line between us and world would be devoid of interest and importance. After all, off-sides isn't joint-carving but is of much interest to soccer fans nonetheless: they keenly debate controversial cases, how the rule might be revised to improve the game, and so on. Likewise, even if the line between thinker and world isn't joint-carving, we might nonetheless take great interest in whether a judgment's truth depends on the thinker or just on the world, *given our parochial way of drawing the boundary*.¹⁹ It's just that this would not be the question of *objectivity* as initially understood. For the whole *point* of the objective-subjective distinction, as I read it, is to mark the extent to which an opinion reflects the world *as it is in itself*, independently of the thinker. This is a metaphysical notion, rooted in the traditional distinction between reality and appearance: the world *as it is in itself* is the world as it *really* is.²⁰ It is this conception of objectivity that requires a joint-carving line between world and thinker. If it's just a line drawn by *our* parochial concepts, then a so-called “alethically objective” judgement would be one whose truth depends not the world *as it is in itself*, but on the world *as*

¹⁸ More accurately: if something is *alethically* objective, it must be *conceptually* objective that it's *alethically* objective. But that's not much of a slogan.

¹⁹ Thanks to participants at the NYU-Columbia graduate conference, who pressed me on this point when I presented this paper there.

²⁰ Or at least, the two notions are closely connected. Perhaps the moral of Nagel's (1986) is that the world as it *really* is can contain subjective elements; nonetheless, the point would remain that its objective elements are at least *part of* how it really is.

defined by our conceptual scheme. You can *call* this objectivity if you want (there's no need to fight over the term), so long as we agree that it has lost its metaphysical import.

Third, note that by “the line” between thinker and world I don't mean a *spatial* boundary such as the one drawn by your skin or your skull. I mean a *logical* boundary: a division between those properties (or truths) that belong to the thinker vs those that belong to the world. Let me illustrate with a different example. Suppose I see a quadrilateral with equal sides and angles, and I judge

(6) **This figure is square.**

On the face of it, this is alethically objective because its truth depends just on the fact that *the figure* is a quadrilateral with equal sides and angles, not on my point of view. But on reflection, I do have the property of *being such that the figure is a quadrilateral with equal sides and angles*. So does the truth of (6) depend on *me* after all, making it alethically *subjective*? There's no doubting that I *have* this property of being such that the figure is a quadrilateral with equal sides and angles—call it P for short—so the question is really whether P is to be assigned to “the world”, or to “the thinker's point of view”. There's also no doubting that *as we happen to draw the line*, P falls on the side of the world. But if there are no joints, another community could *with equal legitimacy* draw the line differently and categorize P on the side of the thinker. Given *their* way of cutting the pie, (6)'s truth depends on one's point of view; given *our* way of cutting the pie it doesn't; and without joints there is no “right” way to cut the pie. We can *call* (6) “alethically objective” if we want, and that would be right *given our way of cutting the pie*. But this is not objectivity properly speaking: it just marks that (6)'s truth depends on the world *as we happen to define it*, not the world *as it is in itself*.

You might object that it's incoherent to put P on the side of the thinker, even if there are no joints. But why? Don't say that a thinker's “point of view” is limited to their mental properties, for the case of left and right shows that it isn't—in that case it's just their spatial position. Alternatively, you might say that a “point of view” must be something with respect to which there is inter-personal variation. This would rule out P (since I have P if and only if you do), but it would also rule out cases of Kantian subjectivity where the relevant point of view is something essential to being a thinker in the first place. We could go on in search of a general constraint on a point of view that rules out P while respecting other paradigm cases.²¹ But the exercise is futile for our purposes. At best, the constraint would just reflect *out intuitive conception* of the line between thinker and world, and we already know that on *that* conception P falls clearly on the side of the world. Without joints, other ways of drawing the line are equally legitimate even if they strike *us* as utterly insane.

This then is my rationale behind premise (A): alethic objectivity requires joints because it requires a joint-carving division between thinker and world. Clearly, the same goes for any notion of objectivity in the metaphysical sense. Thus, *conceptual* objectivity requires a joint-carving distinction between thinker and world too. Without one, the idea that a concept fits “the

²¹ Perhaps Wright's (1992) discussion about the nature of judgment-dependence can be read as a search for a general constraint along these lines.

world as it is in itself” would collapse, in which case nothing—not even judgment (5) about electrons—would count as conceptually objective in the metaphysical sense of the term.²²

Gideon Rosen once argued that this metaphysical notion of objectivity presupposes a post-Kantian metaphysics of a “trans-empirical Subject”, something he described as “a very peculiar thing by our lights: an entity not quite identical with anything we encounter in the natural world—and this includes the ‘subject’ of empirical psychology” (1994, p. 277). Once we replace this with a naturalist metaphysics on which we are “empirical, embodied minds” (p. 277), he argued, the notion of objectivity collapses, or at any rate loses its significance. My claim is related insofar as the distinction between a trans-empirical Subject and the world is about as joint-carving as it gets. But Rosen goes too far, in my view, for the naturalistic metaphysics of ourselves as empirical, embodied selves is perfectly consistent with a joint-carving distinction between such selves and the rest of the world. Even if joints are primarily found at the level of fundamental physics, as many believe, certain macro-level concepts may also count as joint-carving, or at least more joint-carving than others. If these include concepts like “thinker” or “self” then judgments that are true independently of the thinker would reflect “the world”—not just as *defined by our conceptual scheme* but as *it is in itself*. Perhaps not quite as pure as the post-Kantian conception, but a genuinely metaphysical notion nonetheless.

The general thought behind (A) is nothing new, of course. The twentieth-century is replete with writers insisting that a dualistic conception of self and world underpins many traditional philosophical “problems”, which dissolve once one sees that this conception is just a product of some cultural moment and not at all mandatory. An obvious example is Richard Rorty, who said that his pragmatism was based on rejecting “the bad seventeenth-century contrasts between being “in us” and being “out there”, between subject and object” (1991, p. 41)²³ Another example is Hilary Putnam, who, in his turn to internal realism, insisted that we give up “a great dream... the dream of a description of physical reality as it is apart from observers, a description which is objective in the sense of being ‘from no particular point of view’” (1992, p. 11).²⁴ Premise (A) is in much the same spirit, fashioned here into the framework of joints and applied to the traditional notion of objectivity.

As an aside, note that alethic objectivity requires more than just a joint-carving *line* between thinker and world; it also requires a joint-carving *relation* between the two. For a judgment is alethically objective, I said, if its *truth depends* just on the world. This is a relation between judgment and world, though I don’t mean this in an ontologically committing sense. The judgment

(6) **This figure is square.**

is true *because* the figure is a quadrilateral with equal sides and angles; hence its *truth depends* on the world even if there is no *entity* such as a fact or state of affairs that serves as its truth-

²² Likewise, if there are other respects of evaluation in addition to truth and fit, then objectivity with regards to *that* respect would require a joint-carving line between thinker and world.

²³ He later described these “bad” seventeenth-century contrasts as “the rhetoric of the Enlightenment”, which “enshrined all the old philosophical oppositions between mind and world, appearance and reality, subject and object” (p. 44). His book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1978) develops this line of thought at great length.

²⁴ Later he describes this dream as the “epistemic ideal of achieving a view from an “Archimedean point”—a point from which we can survey observers as if they were not *ourselves*, survey them as if we were, so to speak, *outside our own skins*” (1992, p. 17).

maker in any serious sense. The important point is that truth is just a property of judgments, and properties are abundant.²⁵ In addition to truth, then, there is the relational property of *shmuth* which a judgment has relative to a given thinker if the judgment is true and the thinker enjoys entertaining it. If I enjoy entertaining (6) but you don't, then (6) is *shmue for me* but not *for you*. So, while (6)'s *truth* depends just on the world, its *shmuth* does not: it depends (in part) on the thinker. And *shmuth* is just the beginning: if properties are abundant there are *gazillions* of truth-like properties, each with an associated relation of "truth-like-dependence". The question then is whether one of these truth-like properties and its associated relation is joint-carving. If not, I claim, the notion of alethic objectivity collapses once again. For if we ask whether (6) "reflects" the world as it is in itself, there is no answer. It does relative to one truth-like concept but not relative to another, and that is all there is to say. Of course, since *we* happen to use the concept of truth, we'll say that (6) reflects the world independently of the thinker and categorize it as objective accordingly. But another community that uses the concept of *shmuth* will, *with equal legitimacy*, say that (6) does *not* reflect the world independently of the thinker and categorize it as *subjective!* Without joints, the categorization just reflects *our parochial choice of truth-like concepts*, not the world as it is in itself; hence the notion of alethic objectivity collapses once again. That's the rough idea, at least—much more must be said about this idea of alternative truth-like concepts, some of which I say in Dasgupta (manuscript b). But this enough to gesture at why alethic objectivity requires a joint-carving *relation* between thinker and world, in addition to a joint-carving *line* between them.

4. Conceptual objectivity as a normative notion

Let me now turn to premise (B), which states that the notion of conceptual objectivity—i.e., of joint-carving—is irreducibly normative.

I said earlier that there are numerous theories of what joint-carving amounts to: there's the Lewis-Sider view on which a concept is joint-carving if it expresses a natural property, the Armstrongian view on which a concept is joint-carving if it expresses a property that corresponds to a universal, and other views besides. To explain why joint-carving is an irreducibly normative notion, I'll focus mainly on the Lewis-Sider view for the sake of concreteness. I'll finish by indicating how the same points apply to the Armstrongian view, and by then it should be clear that the same will go for *any* theory of joints. But (to be transparent) I'll leave that last step as an exercise for the reader.

To begin, note right away that the Lewis-Sider view must have two components. The first posits the key notion of naturalness, which distinguishes a select few properties that are natural from the rest. That much is pure metaphysics, but there must also be a normative claim to the effect that it's *right* to think in terms of natural properties. Remember, the very idea of joint-carving started from the observation that judgments can be evaluated not just for truth, but also for whether they use the right concepts. Joint-carving concepts, by definition, are those that are right independently of us—they are right "because of the world". So, the Lewis-Sider view only counts as a theory of joint-carving if it includes the normative claim that expressing a natural property is a *right-making* feature of a concept (and judgments containing it).

²⁵ In saying that truth is a property, I don't mean to rule out a deflationary conception of truth precisely because properties are abundant. Even deflationists agree that there are true judgments, and indeed that there is a set of true judgments; since there is a property for every set, they must also agree that there is a property of truth in this abundant sense.

Next, notice that both components must hold independently of any particular point of view—they must be *alethically* objective, that is. This is clear with the metaphysical component. The key point (again) is that joint-carving concepts are, by definition, those that are right “because of the world”, independently of us. On the Lewis-Sider view, these are concepts of natural properties. So, if a property P is natural, this cannot be because P reflects our linguistic history, or conceptual scheme, or cultural heritage, or anything of that ilk. Otherwise, the concept of P would count as joint-carving only because of these facts about *us*—a contradiction in terms.

The same goes for the normative component, the claim that it’s *right* to think in terms of natural properties. This must also hold independently of us—it cannot just be because thinking in those terms makes our life go well, for example. To see this, note that naturalness is just a property of properties; a property that green has and grue lacks, let’s suppose. Since properties are abundant, there is also a property of *graturalness* that grue has and green lacks. So, if *our* life goes better when we think in terms of *natural* properties, we can imagine a different community of thinkers, the “Gruesters”, whose life goes better when they think in terms of *gratural* properties. And then the Lewis-Sider view would collapse. For even if it holds independently of us and the Gruesters that green is natural and grue is gratural, it would only be right *for us* to think in terms of the natural properties like green; this would not be right *for the Gruesters*. In which case the concept of green would not be joint-carving after all—it wouldn’t be right *independently of us* to think in terms of green rather than grue.

Thus, both components of the Lewis-Sider view must hold independently of us. If the concept of green is to be joint-carving, for example, both

(7) **Green is a natural property**

and

(8) **It’s right to think in terms of natural properties**

must be alethically objective.

But now, notice that it’s not *sufficient* that (8) is alethically objective. For the possibility remains that while *our* concept of “right” applies to all and only those concepts of *natural* properties, the Gruesters have an alternative concept of “gright” that applies to all and only those concepts of *gratural* properties. In that case, it would still hold independently of us (and them) that green is natural and hence *right* to think in terms of. But equally, it would hold independently of them (and us) that grue is gratural and hence *gright* to think in terms of! In which case the Lewis-Sider view collapses once again. The view is *supposed* to be one on which there is “One Right” way to think about the world, a set of preferred concepts distinguished by the world itself (the joint-carving ones). But the view has not yet delivered on this promise. The problem is that there is, as it stands, a perfect symmetry between us and the Gruesters: one set of concepts is right, another set of concepts is gright, and in both cases *the world itself* distinguishes which concepts these are. As of yet, there is nothing to break the symmetry and distinguish one set of concepts as “Really Right”, so to speak. What’s needed, intuitively, is that our concept of “right” is *itself* joint-carving. But we can’t just add this to the Lewis-Sider view, for it’s supposed to be a theory of what joint-carving *is* in the first place!

Perhaps the problem should have been obvious from the start. The very idea of joint-carving sprang from the thought that our received concepts may be *merely parochial*; concepts that suit *our* way of life but have no further basis in the world. If we take that thought seriously, we must then acknowledge the possibility that our *normative* concepts such as “right” are also parochial, tailored to our way of life with (again) no further basis in the world. If so, we cannot hope to break the symmetry between us and the Gruesters with our received normative concepts, for there’ll inevitably be parallel concepts that play a symmetric role in their system.²⁶

Having identified the problem, though, the solution is clear. What we need is a symmetry-breaker, and it is a fool’s game to look for one in our received conceptual repertoire. We must therefore posit something new: a further fact that distinguishes naturalness as “normatively significant” over graturalness, a fact in virtue of which concepts of natural properties are “Really Right”. The scare quotes are here to emphasize that these terms are not used in their ordinary English sense—they are theoretical terms, introduced with the stipulation that they are to express a further fact that breaks the symmetry.

Is this move to theoretical vocabulary objectionable? I don’t see why. For one thing, “naturalness” was a theoretical term all along—Lewis and Sider were hardly using it in its ordinary English sense! For another thing, we just saw that *if* the idea of joint-carving is intelligible, we cannot expect to express it in ordinary language terms. The move to theoretical vocabulary is therefore unsurprising; my claim here is just that the needed theoretical notion is a *normative* one, i.e. that of “normative significance”.

In sum, I claim that the Lewis-Sider view is properly understood as follows. The metaphysical component is as before, namely that a select few properties are natural (where this is alethically objective). And the normative component is that naturalness is *normatively significant*, where this is a new theoretical term stipulated to express a normative symmetry-breaker between us and the Gruesters. If there is one, that is, for we cannot *stipulate* that the Lewis-Sider view is true! More carefully, then, the normative component is that *there is* a normative symmetry breaker that holds of naturalness, which “normative significance” is stipulated to express. Two things follow from this stipulation. The first is that normative significance is not gr-izable. To be sure, we could introduce the word “grormative significance” which is true of graturalness and not naturalness; and since properties are abundant there is *some* property of grormative significance. But *if* there is such a thing as normative significance, then—by stipulation—this is not enough to break the symmetry. It is a mere symmetry in language, as it were, not in normative reality. Second, if naturalness is normatively significant this cannot hold in virtue of facts about us and our linguistic history, conceptual scheme, cultural heritage, and so forth. For if it did, the symmetry wouldn’t be broken in the first place—there’d be corresponding facts about the Gruesters that distinguish graturalness just as facts about us distinguish naturalness, and there’d be symmetry regained.

Indeed, the same reasoning shows that normative significance must be *primitive*—a normative property that is not identical or reducible to anything else. To see this, suppose that naturalness is normatively significant in virtue of having some property N. Since properties are abundant, there’ll inevitably be another property G that stands to graturalness just as N stands

²⁶ This possibility of alternative normative concepts like “gright” was explored in depth by Eklund (2017). The possibility is by no means trivial and much more must be said to defend it; see Dasgupta (manuscript a) for some defense.

to naturalness. So, for naturalness to be normatively significant over graturalness, N must already have normative significance over G. If this is an irreducible fact about N, we're done. Suppose instead that N is normatively significant in virtue of the fact that it has some further property N*. Well, there'll be some other property G* that stands to G just as N* stands to N... and so on. At some point, *something* must be normatively significant all on its own, not in virtue of anything else.²⁷

Hence we have (B), the claim that joint-carving is irreducibly normative: it consists in this irreducible property of being normatively significant. And we saw in the last section that *all* objectivity requires joint-carving, i.e. a joint-carving line between thinker and world (that was premise (A)). This establishes my central claim that objectivity *writ large* is an irreducibly normative notion.

At least, that's the rationale behind (B) on the Lewis-Sider view of joint-carving. But much the same goes for the Armstrongian view that a concept is joint-carving if it expresses a property that corresponds to a universal. Like the Lewis-Sider view, this has two components. The first component is pure metaphysics: it posits a sparse domain of universals which correspond to a select few properties. And the second component is a normative claim to the effect that it's *right* to think in terms of those properties. As before, the issue is how to render this normative claim in such a way to break the symmetry between us the Gruesters.

But here we must make the point a little differently. With the Lewis-Sider view, I said that if there's a property of naturalness that green has and grue lacks, then *since properties are abundant* there's also a property of graturalness that grue has and green lacks. We then imagined that it's *right* to think in terms of natural properties, and *gright* to think in terms of gratural properties, and the question was how to break the symmetry between right and gright. But this time, the symmetry is a bit more subtle. For suppose there's a universal corresponding to green but not grue. Since universals are *not* abundant, we cannot assume that there's also a universal corresponding to grue but not green. Nor can we assume that there's a "gruniversal" corresponding to grue, for the metaphysical component of Armstrong's view posits a *sparse* domain of entities and there may not be enough to go around. There is therefore a *metaphysical* asymmetry insofar as green corresponds to one of these entities and grue does not.

Nonetheless, the key is to note that the metaphysics is normatively inert. Even if green corresponds to a universal and grue does not, it doesn't in the least bit follow that it's right to think in terms of green but not grue. Think of a universal as a kind of appendage that attaches to the property of being green, and perhaps even to green things too (depending on your theory of instantiation). There is then this *metaphysical* difference between green things and grue things: the former have an appendage while the latter do not. But again, why on earth does this mean that it's *right* to think in terms of green and not grue? It doesn't. The normative claim must be added by hand.

With this clearly in mind, we see that the metaphysical asymmetry is irrelevant for our purposes. There is a *normative* symmetry insofar as *we* think in terms of green and not grue,

²⁷ What if there's an infinite descending chain of normative significance, you might ask? That is, a chain in which naturalness is normatively significant because N is, and N is normatively significant because N* is, and N* is normatively significant because N** is, and so on? Well, then it follows that normative significance isn't reducible to anything non-normative, which is all I mean by normative primitivism.

which is right; and *the Gruesters* think in terms of grue and not green, which is gright. And that's all the symmetry we need, for (as we just saw) metaphysics is powerless to break it. The question is how *else* to break the symmetry, and (as before) the solution is to posit the theoretical notion of normative significance. The normative component of Armstrong's view therefore becomes the claim that properties with appendages are normatively significant, and the argument that this is irreducible normativity goes through just the same.

One moral is that the metaphysics was idle all along. For we don't really need the appendages; we could instead just say that properties like green are normatively significant *directly*, without the detour through universals. The same goes for the Lewis-Sider view: rather than saying that a select few properties are natural, only to find ourselves needing to add that naturalness is normatively significant, we could instead cut out the middle-man and say that those select properties are normatively significant without the detour. You might now object that the resulting view *just is* the Lewis-Sider view we had at the start, with the merely verbal difference that where they said "natural" we now say "normatively significant". In this I would agree, *so long as you agree that naturalness is an irreducibly normative property*. What I've argued is that there must be irreducible normativity somewhere; what we call it is neither here nor there.

In fact, we don't even need the properties. Earlier I conceded the abundant conception of properties for the sake of argument, but this extravagant metaphysics does no real work. Suppose *per a* sparse conception that there are select properties such as being green and being negatively charged, but no such thing as the property of being grue, or being off-side. Still, there are green gemstones and grue gemstones; there are strikers caught off-side and there are negatively charged electrons. These are all thoughts we can have, ways we can think or theorize about the world. The question is whether some of these are the *right* way to think, independently of us, and—just as with Armstrong—the fact that some of them correspond to a domain of sparse properties is normatively irrelevant. If some ways of thinking are right independently of us, we can capture this by saying that *those thoughts* are normatively significant. There is no need for the metaphysics of sparse properties—indeed, for our purposes there is no need for any properties whatsoever.

5. Conclusion

I've argued that objectivity in the metaphysical sense—a conception of the world *as it is in itself*—is irreducibly normative. The very idea of objectivity in this sense contains, within it, a commitment to irreducibly normative properties. What if, like me, you have independent reasons to think that there is no such thing as irreducible normativity? Then the conception of the world *as it is in itself* is an enigma, something we can imagine in fiction but isn't real.

Does this mean that everything is subjective? Yes and no. It does *not* mean that every judgment reflects something about us *as distinct from the world as it is in itself*. That would be a view on which there *is* a joint-carving notion of the world as it is in itself, but we (for whatever reason) can never reach fully across it—this Kantian view is certainly not mine. Nor need we deny that some judgments are objective in the thin sense that they reflect the world and not us *as we happen to draw the line between the two*. But what it does mean is that there aren't really "two" there in the first place: it's better described as the line we draw through *it*, the *we-and-world* unity. Or even better: a line that *it* draws through *it*.

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