

Objective and Subjective Claims

TIP Sheet

OBJECTIVE AND SUBJECTIVE CLAIMS

An objective claim is a statement about a factual matter—one that can be proved true or false. For factual matters there exist widely recognized criteria and methods to determine whether a claim is true or false. A subjective claim, on the other hand, is not a factual matter; it is an expression of belief, opinion, or personal preference. A subjective claim cannot be proved right or wrong by any generally accepted criteria.

Objective claims & facts

An objective claim may be true or false; *just because something is objective does not mean it is true*. The following are objective claims because they concern factual matters, that is, matters that can be verified as true or false:

Taipei 101 is the world's tallest building.
Five plus four equals ten.
There are nine planets in our solar system.

Now, the first statement of fact is true (as of this writing); the other two are false. It is possible to verify the height of buildings and determine that Taipei 101 tops them all. It is possible to devise an experiment to demonstrate that five plus four does *not* equal ten or to use established criteria to determine whether Pluto is a planet.

Facts previously considered true may come to be considered false if new criteria, methods, or technology emerge. For example, the definition of *planet* was recently revised. Experts agreed that Pluto did not conform to the new accepted criteria. At that point, the statement, "There are nine planets in our solar system" became false. Even if a factual statement is demonstrably false, it remains an objective claim on a factual matter.

A statement is a factual matter even if you can only imagine a method by which it might be verified. For example, suppose I claim that humanoid life exists on planets outside our galaxy. I can imagine methods that could be used to determine whether this is true, even if I cannot carry them out—send a faster-than-light spaceship to look, perhaps. However, when I imagine methods I may not indulge in pure fantasy; I must use widely recognized criteria. If the consensus is that faster-than-light travel is impossible, then my imagined test using a faster-than-light ship fails to meet generally recognized criteria. I would have to propose another way to test my claim, using acceptable criteria. Whether you disbelieve or disagree with my claim, it is an objective claim; either there is or there is not humanoid life outside our galaxy, independently of whether or not either of us believes it.

Subjective claims & opinions

In contrast to objective claims, subjective claims cannot be proved true or false by any generally accepted criteria. Subjective claims often express opinions, preferences, values, feelings, and judgments. Even though they may involve facts, they do not make factual (provable) claims, and therefore they are, in a sense, neither true nor false in the same way an objective claim is true or false. They are outside the realm of what is verifiable. For example, consider the following subjective claims:

Trout tastes better than catfish.
Touching a spider is scary.
Venus Williams is the greatest athlete of this decade.
Hamsters make the best pets.

While we know that it is a *fact* that people eat fish, that spiders can be touched, that Venus Williams is an athlete, and that people befriend hamsters, all of the above are *value* claims that cannot be proved true or false by any widely accepted criteria. We can just as easily make the following counter-claims:

Catfish is much tastier than trout.
Touching a spider is fascinating.
Lance Armstrong is the best athlete ever.
Everyone should have a cat.

In matters of opinion, there are no generally accepted standards or methods that would prove one or the other claim conclusively true or false. Neither of the opposing claims above is wrong, and either or both could be true. Just because a claim is subjective does not mean it is false.

In reading, you can often identify subjective claims by signal words such as these:

good/better/best bad/worse/worst is considered to be it's likely that	it suggests may mean that would seem possibly
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The illusion of opposites

Since objectivity does not guarantee truth, and since subjectivity is not necessarily false, it makes sense that objectivity is not the exact opposite of subjectivity. Subjectivity and objectivity are *different ways* of knowing.

Mistaking subjectivity and objectivity as opposites can lead to problematic positions in philosophy, morality, and ethics. If you are interested in pursuing this line of inquiry, you might start with "Thinking Critically About the 'Subjective/'Objective' Distinction" by Sandra LaFave of West Valley College in California:

http://instruct.westvalley.edu/lafave/subjective_objective.html

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Since subjectivity is a different way of knowing, it is important to participate respectfully in dialogue with those whose subjective claims differ from one's own. It is possible to respect the person even while disagreeing with that person's opinion. As Voltaire said, "I may disagree with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it."

The belief that every person is entitled to an opinion does not mean that every opinion is as good as any other. Not all opinions are equally valuable. Some opinions are better informed, more practical, or more compassionate-better for the human race in general, you might say. Defective opinions and judgments, based on defective facts or defective reasoning, may be worse than foolish or impractical; they may be harmful-witness the Holocaust, a result of virulent racist opinions put into action.

Cultivate the ability to distinguish objective from subjective; it is crucial to the critical evaluation of claims, intellectual honesty, and respectful dialogue.