

HOWARD SANKEY*

THE TWOFOLD OBJECTIVITY OF TRUTH

Abstract

Truth about matters of fact is objective. This is not just because truth is objective. It is also because facts are objective. An objective fact makes an assertion of that fact true. The objectivity of the fact adds a further element of objectivity to the objective truth of the assertion. True assertions of fact are true because truth is objective and because the facts that make them true are objective. True assertions of fact are objective twice over. Their objectivity is twofold. Or, at least, that is the point I seek to establish here.

Keywords: truth, facts, objectivity

I.

Truth about matters of fact is objective. This is not just because truth is objective. It is also because facts are objective. An objective fact makes an assertion of that fact true. The objectivity of the fact adds a further element of objectivity to the objective truth of the assertion. True assertions of fact are objectively true both because truth is objective and because the facts that make them true are objective. True assertions of fact are objective twice over. Their objectivity is twofold. Or, at least, that is the point I seek to establish here.

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II.

The notion of objectivity is ambiguous. To reduce the ambiguity, I distinguish three main forms of objectivity. There may be other forms of objectivity beyond these three. The aim is to reduce the ambiguity, not to remove it altogether.

The most basic form of objectivity is ontological objectivity. We are familiar with the ontological form of objectivity from the expression “objective reality.” This form of objectivity relates to the way the world (or reality) is. There is a way that the world is that does not depend on us. Nor does it depend on the way we think the world is. Reality itself is independent of human belief, thought, or experience. Its existence, nature, and structure are entirely independent of human thought, language, conceptual activity, and perceptual experience. The world as it is in itself, independent of all human contribution, is objective reality.

The second form of objectivity is the objectivity of truth. We are familiar with this form of objectivity from the expression “objective truth.” Truth is objective in the sense that it does not depend on what we believe. Truth depends on the way the world is. A true assertion or belief is one that gets the world right. It is irrelevant to the truth that we believe the world to be a particular way. The truth about the world need not be how we believe (or wish) the world to be. Truth is not determined by what we believe, but by how the world is.

The third form of objectivity is epistemic objectivity. This form of objectivity is grounded in standards of epistemic justification. Salient examples of such justificatory standards are the criteria of theory appraisal employed by scientists in the choice of scientific theory. A scientist who adopts a theory on the basis that it satisfies relevant methodological criteria does so on an objective basis. The use of such criteria excludes subjective factors from scientific theory choice while ensuring that the choice is based on genuine epistemic considerations.¹

The three forms of objectivity that I have just described are intimately related. The objectivity of truth is grounded in the ontological form of objectivity. It is the way the world objectively is that determines the objective truth of assertions about the world. Epistemic objectivity is connected to standards of epistemic justification, such as the methods and norms of scientific inquiry. Where epistemically objective methods and norms are employed in the conduct of an inquiry, they provide an effective means of arriving at the objective truth about the objective world.

¹ For detailed development of this account of epistemic objectivity, see (Sankey 2020, 2021).

A full account of the nature of objectivity requires detailed analysis of all three forms of objectivity that I have identified, as well as the relationship between them. My aim in this paper is to contribute to the broad project of a full account of objectivity by developing one aspect of that account. Rather than a full account of objectivity, it is the objective nature of truth, as well as the relation of objective truth to ontological objectivity, that is the principal interest here.

III.

For present purposes, I shall adopt a correspondence conception of truth. For an assertion about the world to be true it must reflect the way the world is. It must accurately report the way the world actually is. It must get the facts right. It must correspond to reality.

On a correspondence conception, truth is a property that an assertion possesses in virtue of bearing a certain relationship to reality.² Simply put, the relationship holds when what is asserted to be the case is in fact the case. To employ the traditional example, the assertion “Snow is white” is true just in case snow is white. A certain fact (snow’s being white) is asserted to be the case. For the assertion to be true, that fact must obtain. The relationship that obtains between the assertion and the fact that must obtain for the assertion to be true is the relationship of correspondence.³

The relation of correspondence is not characterized in terms of belief. On a correspondence conception, truth is a non-epistemic notion. For a statement to be true is independent of whether the statement is believed to be true. A statement may be true even if it is believed to be false. Equally, a statement may be false even though it is believed to be true. Indeed, a statement may be true even though nobody believes it.

The point applies even in the case of justified beliefs. A belief may be justified and yet false. Equally, a belief may be unjustified and yet true. Though epistemic justification may be a good indication of truth, it is independent of

² Though I have here written of an assertion being true, it is not necessary for present purposes to take a stand on the nature of the truth-bearers (e.g., whether they are beliefs, assertions, sentences, propositions, etc.).

³ For the purposes of this paper, it is not necessary to adopt a specific version of the correspondence conception of truth. The points that I make about the objectivity of truth are general points that apply whether one thinks of correspondence in terms of isomorphism, reference, or truth-making (for details, see, e.g., Wrenn 2015). Indeed, minimalist accounts of truth that conceive of truth strictly in terms of the Tarskian T-scheme may also be regarded as correspondence theories for present purposes (cf. Horwich 1991, ch.7).

truth. Correspondence truth is non-epistemic, not just in the sense that it is independent of belief, but in the stronger sense that it is independent of epistemic justification.

A non-epistemic correspondence conception of truth provides a significant sense in which truth is objective. An assertion or belief that is true in this sense does not depend for its truth on whether it is believed to be true. Truth depends on the way the world is rather than how it is believed to be. Truth is independent of belief. It is an objective matter whether an assertion or belief is true. Because truth is independent of belief, truth is objective. Non-epistemic truth is objective truth.⁴

IV.

As we have just seen, truth in the non-epistemic correspondence sense is objective. Because truth obtains in virtue of a correspondence relation it is independent of belief. Truth is objective because the non-epistemic correspondence relation in virtue of which it obtains is itself objective.

But there is a second sense in which correspondence truth is objective. This sense turns on the objectivity of the facts that make true factual claims true. It is not just that truth in the correspondence sense is non-epistemic. What makes a factual claim true is the very fact that the factual claim reports to be the case. Facts are objective. Their objectivity flows through to the truth of the claims that report them. This provides an element of objectivity in addition to the objectivity of non-epistemic truth.

The objectivity of facts connects the objectivity of truth with ontological objectivity. In the basic ontological sense of objectivity, the existence, structure, and nature of reality is independent of human thought, language, or experience. Expressed in this general form, ontological objectivity relates to reality considered as a whole. But ontological objectivity need not be conceived solely in such general terms. Ontological objectivity exists as well at the local level. Ontological objectivity may be found at the level of particular objects, the properties they possess, and the relations into which they enter. In short, ontological objectivity applies at the level of facts. Not just reality itself, but particular facts are objective.

⁴ I do not wish to suggest that an epistemic conception of truth is unable to provide an objective conception of truth. To the extent that the epistemic conception of truth is defined in terms of objective epistemic standards, it may be possible to present epistemic truth as objective. But my project is to develop an account of objectivity that is broadly realist in spirit, so I shall not pursue this option. For an account of the relation between objectivity and truth understood in an epistemic sense, see (Ellis 1990).

V.

To illustrate the point, let us work with a simple example:

The computer is on the desk.

At this point in time, a computer is situated on the desk directly in front of me. A particular object, the computer, is in the relation of being on to another object, the desk. The computer's being so related to the desk is a fact. It is a fact that the computer is on the desk.

The fact that the computer is on the desk is an objective fact.⁵ I do not need to believe or know that the computer is on the desk for the computer to be on the desk. It is the way one object, the computer, is related to the other object, the desk, that makes it a fact that the computer is on the desk. The fact that the computer is on the desk has nothing to do with whether I believe or know that the computer is on the desk.

However, it is possible for me not just to believe but to know that the computer is on the desk. With my eyes functioning properly in suitable lighting conditions, it is a simple matter of looking at the computer to see where it is located. There is a perfectly ordinary sense in which objective facts are knowable. In cases such as this, it is just a matter of using our senses in suitable circumstances.

Insofar as we use our senses to determine a fact a question of perspective arises. When we perceive the world, we do so from a particular perspective. For example, when I am seated at the desk, I see the computer screen from the perspective of one seated directly in front of the computer. By contrast, if I look at the computer from the doorway, I see the computer from an angle, as well as at a distance of several meters.

But, while we must perceive the world from a perspective, this is not a reason to think that facts are not objective. Whether I view the computer from in front or at an angle, I may still determine that the computer is on the desk. Nor is the perspective from which I view the computer a part of the fact itself. The computer remains on the desk whether I look at it from directly in front or at an angle from the doorway. The objective fact that the computer is on the desk is not affected by the perspective from which the computer is perceived.⁶

⁵ Since the fact that the computer is on the desk involves artifacts constructed by humans, one might wonder whether it is a genuinely objective fact. However, I have argued elsewhere that such facts involving artifacts are perfectly objective facts (see Sankey 2023a).

⁶ For more on the objectivity of facts, see (Sankey 2022).

VI.

Let us now reflect on the relation between truth and fact. Consider the sentence, “The computer is on the desk.” This sentence is true. It is true precisely because it correctly reports the fact that the computer is on the desk. Because the one object, the computer, bears the relation of being on to the other object, the desk, the sentence is true. Intuitively, it is the fact that the computer is on the desk that makes the sentence true.⁷

The fact that the computer is on the desk is an objective fact. It is a fact that obtains simply in virtue of the relationship that holds between the computer and the desk. It obtains independently of whether the fact is believed or known to obtain. Its obtaining is not affected by the perspective of the observer who perceives that it obtains. The objective fact that the computer is on the desk is not affected by the perspective of the observer.

The objectivity of the fact that makes the assertion true provides a further sense in which the truth of the assertion is objective. It is not just that the assertion is true in a non-epistemic correspondence sense. In addition, the fact that makes the assertion true is an objective fact. The objectivity of the fact combines with the objectivity of correspondence truth to make the assertion objectively true in two distinct ways. It is true by virtue of the objectivity of the correspondence relation and by virtue of the objectivity of the fact that makes it true. Thus, the true assertion of the fact is true twice over. Its objectivity is twofold.

VII.

There is an objection that may be raised against this line of thought. I have argued that the objectivity of truth about matters of fact is twofold. Yet I have appealed to mind-independence in relation to both aspects of objectivity. On the one hand, I claim that truth is objective insofar as it is a non-epistemic correspondence relation that is independent of human mental activity. On the other hand, I claim that truth acquires an added element of objectivity from the mind-independent objective facts that make true factual assertions true. Contrary to what I have argued, this appears to suggest that there is only one element to the objectivity of truth, namely, mind-independence.

But, while mind-independence plays an important role in both aspects of objectivity, there is a significant difference. In the first case, it is the

⁷ Strictly speaking, it is not the sentence that is true, but the sentence as asserted in a specific context. For simplicity, I overlook that nicety here.

non-epistemic correspondence relation itself that is objective and obtains independently of the mental. In the second case, it is the facts that are objective and obtain in a mind-independent manner. The first relates to the correspondence relation itself. The second relates to the nature of the facts that make true factual assertions true. These are two distinct sources of the objectivity of truth. It is in this sense that the objectivity of truth is twofold.

VIII.

I turn finally to four questions that have been raised with respect to the position that I present in this paper.⁸

First, the paper opens with the sentence, “Truth about matters of fact is objective.” This raises the question, “Are there true assertions that are *not* about matters of fact?” In response to this question, I am inclined to say that there are no truths without accompanying matters of fact that make them true. One possible qualification relates to matters of taste. I do not like the taste of Brussels sprouts. This is a fact about me. As such, it is true that I do not like Brussels sprouts. But is there any fact of the matter that my dislike of Brussels sprouts latches onto? Is there some fact about the taste of Brussels sprouts in virtue of which my dislike of them is correct? It seems plausible to think that there is no such fact and that as a result there is no truth about whether Brussels sprouts taste bad. It is just a fact about me that I dislike them. If this is right, then this would tend to support my inclination to say that there are no truths without matters of fact.

Second, the paper characterizes the objectivity of truth about matters of fact largely in terms of mind-independence. “But why can’t there be objective truths about mind-dependent states of affairs, like whether I think pizza is delicious or not?” I have in fact argued in (Sankey 2023b) that subjective personal facts have objective status. But I have not spelled this objectivity out in terms of mind-independence. My mind remains open about this. But to the extent that subjective facts must be characterized in terms of mind-dependence, I may need to modify my account accordingly. I may need to provide two distinct characterizations of the objectivity of facts, one for subjective personal facts, another for facts that are not subjective personal facts. I leave this question unsettled here.

Third, I say that reality is independent of human belief, thought, or experience. “Does this mean that there cannot be mathematical, aesthetic, ethical, or perhaps even culinary aspects of reality, or that these are not mind-depen-

⁸ For these and other questions, I am indebted to the anonymous referees for this journal.

dent?” In characterizing reality as independent of human belief, thought, or experience, I am thinking primarily of the natural world as well as the constructed environment in which humans mostly live out their lives. There is, of course, a sense in which mathematical, aesthetic, ethical, and culinary factors form part of reality. But precisely what one should say about each of these domains is a substantial philosophical question in the respective domain of philosophical inquiry. I see no need for present purposes to make a commitment with respect to the questions that arise in relation to any of these areas. I note, though, that it is entirely possible that one might adopt different views with respect to the different domains, for example, a response-dependent view in aesthetics and a realist view in relation to mathematics.

Fourth, I write that “A true assertion or belief is one that gets the world right.” But “through what Archimedean viewpoint can one conclude that they are grasping the world as it is independent of human influence?” The first point to make is that to say that a true assertion or belief is one that gets the world right is only to make a point about truth and not about whether one can come to know the truth. The second point relates to whether there is an Archimedean viewpoint. This question might be one that is meant to suggest either a relativistic or a skeptical position, both of which I reject. To briefly sketch my approach, I distinguish between matters of scientific knowledge and matters of common sense. With respect to science, the classic realist view is simply that the success of science is best explained by the truth or approximate truth of our best theories. A similar explanationist approach may be deployed at the level of common sense. But I am partial to a Moorean approach at the level of common sense. To deny that we are mostly right about matters of common sense (e.g., “Here is one hand . . . here is another”) is to concede far more than we ought to concede to the skeptic. I do not say that we should adopt an attitude of certainty with respect to the success of our endeavors to acquire knowledge of the world. But I do think that we can adopt an attitude of considerable confidence toward those endeavors.

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