

## Chapter 15: Fact and Value

### “Objective vs. Subjective?”

*Reporter: “Professor Russell, is it true you do not believe in the Spiritual World?”*  
*Bertrand Russell: “My good man, I don’t even believe in the Physical World.”*

This chapter deals with two misconceptions that obscure the roots of controversy. These are 1) that facts are independent of human judgments; 2) that evaluation is necessarily an expression of values.

Many people think of facts as some kind of little stones, “hard data” they are sometimes called. Being stone-like there is no question that they are “really there.” All we have to do is find them and pick them up. “Knowledge of fact,” from this point of view, possesses a “hard objectivity.” Facts are what’s real.

This image of facts does not help us understand the variety and depth of controversy that exists in the world. When a controversy arises, either side takes itself to be dealing in hard, stony fact and rushes to the conclusion that their opponents can’t tell a stone from a shadow; so stupid or perverse are they. But can *argument* settle such disagreements?

#### Fact and authority

Some religious communities take sickness to be a visitation from an evil spirit or the withdrawal of God’s grace. Aren’t they mistaken? Aren’t those who understand sickness to be the result of a bacterium or virus *really* in possession of the facts? Don’t they *prove* their superior grasp of fact by curing the illness with a serum?

An authority from one of these religious communities might offer a different interpretation. The serum is a “tool of Grace” by which the evil spirit is driven out. And those bacteria -- which they can see under a microscope just as well as we can -- are a physical manifestation of the demon causing the illness.

It is important to realize that so long as it is important to this religious community to see changes in the world as the interaction of spirits, and so long as they can translate without too much practical disadvantage what we say in our language into theirs, there can be no *argument* which will definitively demonstrate that our “scientific” conception of fact is better than theirs.

But, if they begin to die off, won’t that clinch our argument? Won’t the desire for pure survival shift their conceptions of authority, and consequently of fact? Maybe, but only if they value physical survival above maintaining the belief system of their community.

The characterization of fact as dependent on the authority of a community also helps us understand a common controversy in America. Many think that the evidential rules used in criminal cases are an affront to common sense. Consider a court room in which a judge does not admit as trial evidence a murder weapon seized by police in an illegal search. To “common sense” -- the community untrained in the practice of Law -- the weapon is a hard fact. In the courtroom, for the purposes of this particular trial, it does not exist. This again shows how authority can determine the nature of fact.

## Is sense-experience the basic authority?

Thinking of fact as relative to specific communities and the authorities they recognize makes many of us uncomfortable. It appears *too relativistic*. After all, there are many kinds of authority recognized across diverse communities. And trying to define just what a community is, is problematic. Can't we rely on plain old sense experience: what we see, feel, hear, smell and taste? Do we argue about the existence of water?

Yes, but... Cross your middle finger over you index finger (either hand will do). Close your eyes. Touch the tip of your nose. You will feel two nose-tips. But you don't have two noses. When you see pools of water on a hot summer highway, you know what you see isn't *real*. And the room that feels warm to a person coming out of the cold can feel chilly to a person who has been sitting quietly in it.

"Can you tell me, Socrates, whether virtue is acquired by teaching or by practice, or if neither by teaching nor practice, then whether it comes to man by nature, or in what other way?"

—Plato, *Meno*

What we rely on to judge some of our perceptions as illusory is a kind of “theory”. The exact nature of this theory is still a controversial issue among philosophers and scientists. What is clear is that illusions do not come labeled as such: it requires an exercise in judgment to distinguish them from “factual” perceptions.

The possibility of illusion or misperception shows one thing. Perception alone does not provide us with the “hard facts” we might hope to use to convert “primitively” thinking people to our scientific point of view. They might convert as they try to reconcile their beliefs to the life they are faced with living; but *arguments* alone can't do that. They can't because the authorities we recognize and the authorities they recognize may not be the same.

### Procedure for Section I:

In trying to understand the roots of persistent controversy, examine the context of the dispute:

**a. Do the disputants consider themselves to be members of the same general community?**

When parties to a dispute are very polarized, they tend to demonize each other. Argument is useless if both sides are firm in their insistence of no compromise.

**b. Do they recognize the same authorities as appropriate sources of fact?**

If no common authority can be found for deep agreement, can the parties to the dispute agree to live together? Or are they pushing to convert or even exterminate the opposition?

**c. Can either party to the dispute state what would count as evidence against their own position?  
Would the opposite side accept such evidence?**

If the answer to both questions is yes, then there is hope for reconciliation. If the answer is no, there is no specific point to argument. (But see Chapter 18: Functions of Conflict.)

These criteria are harder to use than may be apparent at first glance. We each belong to many communities. Our membership in a particular community is often determined by the authorities we are willing to recognize as well as the interests we share. Communities themselves may be conceived of as broader or narrower depending on the issues under dispute. For example, Americans tend to agree on general issues despite disagreement on specific ones, i.e. the right to vote vs. the right to choose an abortion. Being a Democrat or Republican does not determine whether one is Pro-Life or Pro-Choice.

Despite the problems in using it, this first step focusses our attention on what might be some important sources of persistent controversy.

## Section II. Does Evaluation Imply a Commitment?

If someone says, “This is a very fine gun,” does it mean she *likes* the gun? Couldn’t a pacifist know and apply the standards necessary to distinguish between a well and badly made weapon? Similarly, are police officers to enforce a law only if they agree with it?

It is a very common mistake to think that because a person applies standards, that person is in favor of those standards. People who confuse this issue are likely to confuse as well the difference between criticism and dislike, as though liking something made one incapable of seeing its disadvantages.

These are simple misconceptions, yet so very common as to merit special attention. Most anyone could understand it if someone said:

1. This isn’t very good beer; but I like it.
2. He’s a good ball player; but I hate his guts.
3. The choice cuts of meat I find too fatty for my taste.
4. The candidate is unappealing; but I’ll vote for him, nonetheless.
5. The best hunting is found in Canada. But, personally, I am not at all interested in hunting.

A simple procedure avoids confusing evaluation with commitment when analyzing disputes.

## Procedure for Section II

When disputants gives an evaluation; consider whether:

- a. **they are merely indicating how they “feel” ; or whether**
- b. **they are using some standard to support their evaluation.**

Many people hedge their judgments by beginning with, “I feel that...” so as to not offend their listener, if he or she disagrees. This maneuver also dodges the question of standards. But if it is important, we can push the question of standards and ask the evaluator if he or she agrees or disagrees with the standards as they are normally used

## Chapter Highlights

Three common misconceptions about value were discussed:

- I: the first mistake is the idea that “hard fact” will come to the rescue to settle disputes. But what a fact is, depends upon what authorities we acknowledge to determine what is a fact.
- II: the second mistake is believing criticism to be an expression of dislike; or the use of standards of criticism to indicate a commitment to those standards. But vegetarians can learn to grade steaks.

## Other Related Chapters in This Text

8, Presuppositions  
11 Facts and Feelings  
12, Authority  
19, Problems

## Keywords for Further Data Base Searches

empiricism	intuitionism	mirror of nature
positivism	truth	solipsism
emotivism	post-modernism	certainty

## For Further Consideration

One reason the characterization, “hard,” seems so appropriate for facts is that the way we conceive of facts is in opposition to such “soft” things as wishes, hopes, feelings, and beliefs.

Let’s consider what is recognized by people in most, if not all, cultures of this globe to be a fact: beheading is fatal to humans. We do not consider any facts about human wishes, hopes and feelings to affect the fact of what they wish, hope for or feel. Consider the following list:

1. John feels that beheading is not fatal to humans.
2. Sam hopes that beheading is not fatal to humans.
3. Mary wishes that beheading were not fatal to humans.
4. Harry believes that beheading is not fatal to humans.
5. Jack is firmly convinced that beheading is not fatal to humans.
6. Sue suspects that beheading is not fatal to humans.

7. As far as Howard is concerned, beheading is not fatal to humans; although he is willing to let us believe what we will.

Even though examples 1 through 7 may be true, we do not accept them as disproving that beheading is fatal to humans.

Yet it seems in some cases that facts do depend on the perceptions and beliefs of individuals, e.g. John says, "I feel a pain in my leg." If John is not lying, then that he feels a pain in his leg is a fact. Does this mean that facts are not so hard and that wishes, suspicions, etc. have some bearing on what is fact?

(Considerations in developing an answer: Note that John would not normally say any of the following:

1. I am firmly convinced that there is a pain in my leg.
2. I suspect that there is a pain in my leg.
3. I believe there is a pain in my leg.
4. For me, there is a pain in my leg.)

## Chapter Review Sheet

1. Describe the chapter briefly in your own words.

---

---

---

2. What are the core ideas developed in this chapter? If more than one, list them in order of their importance to you.

---

---

---

3. Briefly explain the importance to you of your first choice.

---

---

---

4. Briefly describe a scenario in which you could apply one of the ideas from the chapter to improve your professional practice.

---

---

---

5. Connect this chapter to at least one thing you already know.

---

---

---

6. Suggest one way to make this chapter more effective.

---

---

---