

# Facts or Feelings?

## Objectivity and Subjectivity in the Information We Encounter

“Those who are accustomed to judge by feeling do not understand the process of reasoning, for they would understand at first sight, and are not used to seek for principles. And others, on the contrary, who are accustomed to reason from principles, do not at all understand matters of feeling, seeking principles, and being unable to see at a glance.” Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, no. 3

Blaise Pascal, the famous French mathematician and philosopher, considered (back in the 1600s) our unique abilities to *reason* and to *feel* and still, somehow, *reach the truth*. Pascal also went on to write, “**We know truth, not only by the reason, but also by the heart**” (*Pensées*, no. 282). It can be *very* difficult to distinguish between emotions – *how we feel* – and facts – what *really is true*. Even so, *we do need to try* if we really are intent on *finding out the truth about something*.

**Ask yourself: What do I prefer when I want to find information? Pure facts or somebody else’s feelings?**

Before you answer that, consider this: many feelings are *disguised* and offered to us as “facts,” while many “facts” are not thoroughly *factual*. Plus, what can *appear* to be true could really be *false!* Truth can be so elusive at times!

**What is a fact?** Generally speaking, it’s supposed to be **something true** – something experienced, observed, verified, known to be real. The **etymology** (word origin) of “**fact**” indicates **something done**.

Essentially, **facts are what we agree to call true**. Truth’s etymology leads us to **faith** and **fidelity**, and faith’s word origin points to **trust**. How appropriate, since we tend to accept “truths” from people we trust: *we have some faith in them*.

As for feelings, we know what they are because we experience them *all the time* through emotions such as joy, anger, anxiety, fear, awe, and love. How do these feelings relate to our abilities to understand information?

**Objective information – as in *objectivity* – is based on unbiased information, not feelings or personal interpretations.**

**Subjective information – as in *subjectivity* – mixes facts with feelings, which leads to *biased information*.**

**Facts can and do arise from feelings, and facts can certainly produce feelings:** one often follows the other and both can be easily confused, especially when we do not take time to speak or think clearly. Even when we do so, people can still misinterpret what we say (or what they *believe* we are saying) and base their feelings on *incorrectly understood information*. *Miscommunication* and *misunderstandings* happen all the time due to any number of *objective* and *subjective* factors.

**Facts often speak directly to our emotions**, causing us to react to information we receive: even the most *objective* facts can provoke us to experience joy, gratitude, sorrow, compassion, relief, and more. The facts, in and of themselves, are *objective*, but our *subjective* thoughts can turn simple truths into complex sources of feelings and further thought.

Feelings, inspiring responses, can eventually yield facts through the consequences of any thoughts, statements made, or actions taken. Someone acting on a partial truth or untruth can react and do something, which results in *something done* – a *fact*. Consequences lead to new causes and effects: one truth or untruth or feeling can change the course of history!

What is true in one place might *not* apply elsewhere. For example, a character in a work of fiction (e.g. a novel, short story, or a poem) does and says things, resulting in “facts” considered “true” within that specific storyline, but the story (even if based on history or a “true story” from the “real world”) is still, in the end, a work of *fiction*.

Another example: in math we might add  $1 + 1$  and feel it was safe to assume that **2** was the correct answer, but only when working with regular (**base-10**) numbers and *not* binary numbers (**base-2**), for which the correct answer would actually be **10**.

As you might begin to imagine all the ways this could work out, for worse or better, you can appreciate how powerfully emotion and information can affect each other as well as how difficult “the truth” can be to pin down in any given situation.

*Even so, we have to give it our best effort and make truth a priority in all our informational endeavors!*

It is difficult because some of the information we encounter can be presented in ways which challenge or prompt us to reach certain conclusions. Subjective information can be *ruined* by emotions – either by those who provide it or those who react to it. Information could be unclear, imperfect, or false in some way, but, if it *touches a nerve* and *provokes reactions*, however illogical or wrong such reactions are, it could be *mistaken* for truth and *incorrectly acted upon*, which could be problematic.

**Controversy** – which etymologically means **to turn against** – is a dangerous environment for information: any “facts” in this setting can be driven or derailed by opinions (subjectivity). Unless you can calmly distinguish facts from feelings, you can easily find yourself confused and emotionally affected by the situation.

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Ideally, facts should be acceptable, incontestable - *the very essence of truth*. Facts should be *clear*, easily seen, not subject to further debate. Yet, information does not break down into neat little columns of true or false: for any given piece of information there can be plenty of area for disagreement.

There are, in fact, things – including *big things*, such as *the origin and nature of the universe* – that can challenge human understanding and our abilities to prove or disprove theories or thoughts.

For example, the **Scientific Method** of testing *what can be observed* is limited to the *physical world* and can only tell us so much about things. Scientific “facts” can and do *change over time* as *new information* arrives and technologies are developed: what once was held as *true* could be *false* once disproven.

Since science cannot serve as our only guide to facts, the rest is up to us to decide what is true or false. **Perspective** – where you stand (physically or figuratively) can affect choice.

For example, constellations – groups of stars appearing in the night sky – are recognized by their *relative positions* and are considered factual enough for astronomers to identify stars. Yet these same stars, if viewed *elsewhere* in space, would appear in *relatively different positions*, rendering Earth-based ideas of constellations meaningless.

Back on Earth, we have a world full of perspectives: scientific, cultural, governmental, spiritual, artistic, social, and chronological, just to name a few. What some persons accept as “fact” others could reject solely on the opinions they hold. It might not matter that whatever is being said might be objectively true: emotion makes things personal, susceptible to more opinions, however unnecessary or unjust.

At times, we might wonder if truth is simply *relative* – a philosophical doctrine known as *relativism*, where *what is considered fact* depends on *who* you are, *where* you are, or some *other criteria*.

For ages, philosophers debated concepts such as the truth and whether *any* objectivity really exists. Their fascinating debates can turn the known world inside out, but their intellectual acrobatics are not very helpful when we confront the practical realities and daily dangers of untruths and misinterpretations.

**Every day we make decisions** based on what we *think* is right or true. Our very opinions arise from our absorption and understanding of certain “facts” we encounter. Over days and years, information can define us – our beliefs, our preferences, our goals, our very character. Whatever we do, say, or think also adds to this world of information: we affect *and* are affected by information. We each play a decisive role in how information is shared and evolves.

With this in mind, and to rephrase the question we opened this document with, **would you rather live according to lies or the truth?** Would you rather be misguided, misinformed, victimized, misleading, or misled? Or would you rather be honest with yourself and others and be as best informed as you could be?

**You know the answer, but what do you do?** How do you turn your informational life around? How do you *not* set yourself up to be misled, misinformed, or a misinterpreter of information? **Become aware!** Aware of *what?* For starters:

- **possible defects and distortions** in some of the most seemingly harmless information out there
- **opinions** (yours or others) – statements or understandings which are based largely on *feelings*, not *facts*
- **media bias** – entire networks and publications openly promoting or demoting certain thoughts and perspectives
- **agendas** – attempts to influence certain beliefs or outcomes (e.g. marketing campaigns or political ads)

The next time you turn on a television, read a newspaper, visit a website, or listen to someone, *please pay very close attention*. Listen to the words, the adjectives and descriptions, and the *tone* in which they are spoken. Take note of facial expressions or gestures accompanying statements. None might be obvious. See if you can spot subtle indications of bias.

Beyond that, are there any audio or visual clues (music, sounds, colors, or images) hinting at bias? Are you hearing all sides of the matter or only one perspective? As you listen, do you feel yourself becoming emotional – and, if so, *why is that?* *Do you feel you are being lied to?* Are you lying to *yourself*? Consider your own feelings and why you feel the way you do about certain topics. Are *your own feelings* trying to tell you something, or are they getting in the way of objective truth?

Do you bore easily? We do like to be entertained. We tend to tune out from things that don't seem to be important or interesting. This can lead us to more sensational sources of information. For example, opinionated news announcers and commentators might make for very entertaining experiences, but, for such diversions and amusements, what are you losing in exchange? Is truth cast aside in favor of sensationalism? Do you strongly agree or disagree with what they are saying?

Television networks, websites, newspapers, and other media outlets all compete for audiences – the number of viewers, which translate into “ratings.” As *more* people tune in, ratings and profits rise (and more advertisements could be sold).

Just by watching or listening to broadcasts, you are supporting a broadcaster's actions, even if that is not your intention.

You still have a choice: *you do not have to tune in*. You do not have to accept “facts” blindly or settle for subjectivity.

You do not have to settle for *feelings instead of facts*. You can learn to be *more objective* and *help others seek the truth*.

*You can take control* over the information in your life! You can *reclaim control* over your life through *heightened awareness*.

And *your library* can help: *our own joy* comes from helping you *discover new and reliable sources*, to *verify facts*, and to *empower you* to make more *informed decisions*. Your quest for truth (and, yes, even happiness) can start right in the library.