Subjectivity and its vicissitudes

As I am writing this, I am behind schedule for my deadline. In the past, I thought procrastination was a moral issue; perhaps not a failing, but a moral issue: a choice. Growing up in a Communist country, I have viewed career and achievement – like my peers in disaffected opposition circles – with a certain amount of suspicion. I have often told myself ever since my move to the United States that I don’t want to put professional advancement ahead of life: family, daydreaming, various interests mundane and arcane take precedence over productivity.

But a recent diagnosis of ADD has cast these self-stories in a different light. I now have another explanation, one that doesn’t have to do with the inner recesses of the self, but chemicals in my brain. I have been prescribed medication that, on the occasions I take it, is enough to stop my mind from wandering, from making extraneous connections, perfectly useful in a general sense, but not conducive to the focused attention needed to actually complete projects. It turns out I have a chemical deficiency of sorts, and my behavior is the result of my brain working in slightly abnormal ways. Are these two stories complementary? Or does the chemical explanation obviate, or even disqualify my earlier, non-scientific understanding?

There are two, radically different ways to relate to the world and ourselves: objective and subjective. This distinction has a philosophical pedigree going back at least to the philosophy of Descartes and Kant; and has recently been brought back into contemporary philosophical discourse by Thomas Nagel who, in a number of essays, tracks the degree to which concepts abstract away and are removed from experience. This is not a binary distinction; our mental states constitute a continuum along which they differ in how objective or subjective their conception is. Introspective concepts of perception, sensation, mood, emotion, daydreams or thought are the most subjective. When I apply these concepts to others in attributing to them joy, pain, excitement or jealousy based on remembered or imagined experiences of my own, I am still thinking subjectively. Many of our recognitional concepts – like “blackbird” or “rainbow” – are closely tied to perception, and so are also toward the subjective end of the spectrum. Concepts like “carburetor”, “citizen”, or “chemical imbalance” – characterized by a high level of abstraction – are more objective; and concepts such as “charge”, “electron”, etc. are the most objective, the farthest removed from experiential concepts. On the one end of the spectrum is the physicist’s thoughts about particles and fields; on the other is the meditator’s awareness of her experiences.

Neuro-science and medicine are largely objective endeavors. When choosing a medication, doctors don’t consider differences in people’s life experience, except to the degree that such differences can be captured in objective criteria. On the other hand, my introspective assessment of my day-dreaming and wandering attention is an example of subjective thinking. The relationship between objective and subjective modes of thought has become problematic during the rise of the physical sciences in the 17th century.
In the first part of this essay, I discuss how the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment has changed our perception of the world and our place in it; and how these changes contributed to a devaluation of subjectivity. In the second part, I argue that cultivating subjectivity is essential for a good life.

I Science and subjectivity

Physics and the lived world

The first major clash between subjective and objective thinking didn’t revolve around the mind; it concerned the world. The Scientific Revolution, led by Galileo and Newton in the 17th and 18th century, brought about a monumental change in the way we understand the physical world. Their revolutionary idea is that all physical change can be explained in terms of quantified properties of matter in motion – properties such as size, shape and velocity. The fact that these features are quantifiable allows for a mathematical formulation of the laws of nature. The view of the physical world that emerged is mechanistic; in an only slightly misleading metaphor, it implies that the physical world is a vast machine, its movements and changes governed by precise law.

The Scientific Revolution and its aftermath caused immense upheaval in our world view in a relatively short period of time. As late as in, say, Shakespeare’s time, people in Europe and elsewhere knew nothing of the laws of mechanics, galaxies and black holes, space-time and relativity, evolution, or the chemical underpinnings of life. On the other hand, almost everyone, even educated people believed in an “invisible” world; a spiritual backdrop to the visible one that enlivens it and is in mutual interaction with it. Experience of nature, art, ritual and contemplation brought intimations of it. People felt the vast spaces of the universe sing and shine with the presence of something greater and more awesome than themselves. They believed in God, and many also believed in witchcraft, fairies, spirits, astrology, magic, alchemy and the rest. They viewed the stars and the planets as distant forces intimately involved with us. Their subjective experience of the world as alive, poignant and teeming with all sorts of significance was projected outward and got embodied in their views of reality. This impulse to fill the world with mysterious entities beyond the visible informed popular belief; but it also informed much of philosophy from Plato to Kant. Some of it still survives. Our experience of the world overflows the mere testimony of the senses.

It is this enchanted universe that got shattered by Newton’s great achievement. Not that Newton was fully cognizant of his own message; he himself was a believer and avid alchemist. It is people that came after him who in time brought his discoveries to their conclusion. In time, the universe has been emptied out, not only of its spirits, but also of its colors and sounds. The world turned out to be unimaginably vast, perhaps infinite, and most of it cold, empty and black.

The Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment didn’t only wreak havoc in our view of the universe; it also changed our view of our place in it. The successful scientific reduction of the
chemical to the physical, and the biological to the chemical suggests that the existence of everything in nature, including our brains and bodies – even if not our minds – is grounded in basic physical entities, properties and laws. This, coupled with the widely accepted – though controversial – principle that all physical events have a complete physical explanation, has cast doubt on our subjective sense of free agency. Most of us find it natural to believe that we are the unfettered authors of our personal future, and so are not mere cogs in the great machine; that we alone in the universe are unbound by the great chain of being that weaves together everything else. This sense underlies our thinking about morality and human dignity. But there is no room for such spontaneous freedom in a universe where everything, including our physical movements, has a complete physical explanation.

The immense success of science fostered the realization that the world is nothing like we thought it was, and that, though perception provides the original raw data of science, subjective experience can only play a limited role in understanding the natural world, even when it comes its own place in the universe. At the same time, all that has been purged from the world around us has been, as C.S. Lewis observed, “transferred to the subjective side of the account: classified as our sensations, thoughts, images or emotions. The Subject becomes gorged, inflated, at the expense of the Object.” However, this “gorged” subject itself comes under pressure, as science makes its first steps to account for it.

*The science of the mind*

The discovery that something as intimately personal as a tendency to daydream corresponds to chemical changes in the brain, or that meditation affects brain functioning have been greeted by surprise and excitement in the popular media. Though obvious, it is worth pointing out that there should be absolutely nothing surprising about these connections by now; the intimate mind-brain nexus has been amply demonstrated by neuro-science. Given what we know, the surprise would be if we could demonstrate the existence of anything mental without a brain correlate. I have never seriously doubted, even before my diagnosis, that my lack of focus is based in the way my brain operates. What is controversial is what to make of this connection.

Patricia Churchland argues in her book *Neurophilosophy* (1986) that neuro-science should not only inform but in some cases eventually replace our ordinary psychological accounts of mental phenomena; that subjective self-understanding is rendered obsolete by more scientific modes of understanding the mind. Philosopher Daniel Dennett in *Consciousness Explained* (1991), and neuroscientist Michael Graziano in *Consciousness and the Social Brain* (2013) go farther in claiming that subjective experience is outright illusory. As a recent article in the *New York Times* blithely remarks: “We no longer believe in a numinous life force, an élan vital. So what’s the big deal about consciousness?” Psychologist Daniel Wegner in *The Illusion of Conscious Will* (2002) argues that even our sense of conscious agency – the feeling that, at least occasionally, we consciously decide what we will do – is an illusion refuted by science. Dismissing subjective takes on the mind, and even the existence of subjective experience itself,
is fairly common – though by no means universal – in neuro-science circles and their popularizers in the press.

This imperialistic view of science’s domain – we might call it scientism – is based on the idea that the sciences play a special (authoritative) role in all inquiry. It is not just that science cannot be overruled by any other kind of inquiry – which sounds kind of reasonable. It is that – in the more moderate version of the view – there is nothing further or useful that could be learned about the world from sources outside of science, or – in the more extreme version – that whatever cannot be demonstrated or understood from the objective perspective of science, doesn’t even exist.

In both of its forms, scientism is an extreme and misguided idea of what the scientific world view requires. As everybody knows, we understand ourselves and others primarily by introspection and by listening. Moreover, this kind of subjective self-understanding can be indispensable even if we turn out to be purely biological creatures, without non-physical minds.

In truth, the cognitive and neuro sciences have only made modest inroads so far in explaining what makes us tick. But even if they provided a comprehensive explanation of mind and behavior in purely scientific terms, we still would need to understand ourselves subjectively. Suppose there was a super-intelligent organism — in a twist on Frank Jackson’s famous Knowledge Argument (1982) — that lacked any feeling or experience, a creature of pure thought. A purely scientific account of humans – though very far from reality – is perhaps not an impossibility. So such a being could know everything about humans in neuro-scientific, or information-processing terms – even though it lacked the introspective understanding normal humans have of their subjective reality. Such a creature, however, would seem to know nothing about value, meaning, and human significance. Scientific understanding doesn’t replace or crowd out subjective understanding.

So where does all this leave us with respect to the role of subjectivity? I will argue in the next section that a good life requires serious cultivation of subjectivity. But it should be tempered by fostering the entirely different virtues of objectivity as well: we must be weaned from our pre-scientific view. It is not implausible to think that the scientific world view ushered in changes that make life seem in some respects less meaningful, less fulfilling, fills one with less wonder, gratitude, or joy than before. Some of what we feel about the world is not rooted in any objective feature of it but still requires belief as an anchor. It is easier to feel gratitude if one feels in debt to a higher being. The advancement of the scientific world view didn’t happen without a fight. William Blake, in his alternative creation myth Book of Urizen portrays a creator who makes a book of laws - simple, universal directives to guide both nature and the human will – only to bring ruin on himself and the world. Blake found the physics of Newton abhorrent. As W.H. Auden put it in a letter, Blake broke "off relations in a curse, with the Newtonian Universe". He felt that the world as a single all-encompassing system was too stifling, too oppressive. His romantic rebellion rejected the world of science for the sake of intuition, imagination and passion, which, he felt, had no place in the world.
science describes. He used poetic imagination as his bludgeon to beat back what he thought was the stifling advance of scientific thought. Many others, especially in the literary tradition, followed in his footsteps. But one needs to be careful. Subjective experience is not the best guide to the truth about nature; science is. Questioning the authority of science and reason can lead to catastrophe in a world plagued by global warming and economic problems on a massive scale.

II Subjectivity, objectivity, and the good life

In praise of subjectivity

Objectivity is an orientation towards reality based primarily on objective thinking. Medicine is prescribed based on test scores, symptoms, and protocols. Job applicants are evaluated in terms of degrees, grades, ability, age, gender, etc. Some people think about the world mostly in objective terms. A subjective orientation, on the other hand, is based on an attunement to one’s inner experience as it unfolds in one’s day-to-day living. A person with a subjective orientation pays special attention to her feelings, moods, sensations, and thoughts. Psychoanalysis, meditation, and plain old self-reflection, when done right, all hew close to subjective experience and make it their central preoccupation. No one, of course, is purely objective, or purely subjective in their thinking. The mind oscillates between these two perspectives, and the relationship between them determines what kind of a person we are.

As Freud has described, the mind has powerful built-in mechanisms that turn us away from unwanted experience: repression, dissociation, sublimation, etc. Even so, there are benefits to engaging experience, even negative, disturbing experience. But the spectacular advance of science and industry, and the rise of Enlightenment rationality in the last four hundred years has slowly weakened subjectivity and created a culture that offers less and less incentive to deepen one’s inner life. Modern technology, and especially digital media pose a barrier to silence and quiet reflection. They encourage striving, addiction to information and entertainment, and a general speediness to life where even sensory pleasures are fleeting and mostly unnoticed. Our communications are less personal. More and more, we get distracted from life by its abstractions, by all the ways our culture conceptually frames our existence as individuals, Democrats and Republicans, man and women, white people and minorities, one percenters and workers, consumers, immigrants, and so on.

There is a line of thought in philosophy and the literary tradition which holds that our experience of life matters in ineffable ways that an objective understanding of the world simply cannot capture. Much of Kierkegaard’s philosophy is a warning against the tendency to take an increasingly objective stance. By neglecting to pay attention to experience, what is – sometimes derisively – called “inwardness”, we make life less rich. By becoming less subjective, we cut ourselves off from sources of meaning and value. Human beings cannot thrive without an orientation towards, and engagement with, the subjective experience of their lives; a predominantly objective, conceptual orientation to one’s life is detrimental to well-being.
Kierkegaard puts it in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, “the way is to become subjective, to become a subject.”

But how can a person lack subjectivity? Isn’t it true that, given one’s experience of life, one cannot *fail* to be subjective? To the contrary, the mind can flee its own subjectivity, can escape into alienation. Subjectivity as an orientation involves more than just *having* experiences. It requires a willingness to pay attention; it also requires a habit of thinking about them in terms that are themselves experiential. Compare reading a poem and thinking about it, with reading an abstract and dry description of similar topics and thinking about them in those terms. Psychologist John Teasdale describes the first as capturing the ‘deep structure’ of experience, where meanings have an embodied quality. Knowing the meaning of a poem – unlike understanding a description of it – doesn’t involve endorsing a proposition about its meaning. Thinking about poetry is not governed by rules of rationality, like objective thinking; it rather involves having a rich array of relevant associations, much of which has sensory, gut-level content. According to Teasdale, ‘knowing with the head’ and ‘knowing with the heart’ involve different “cognitive subsystems”: not only do they involve different kinds of concepts (what I have called objective and subjective), they also are characterized by different kinds of thought processes.

Subjectivity and objectivity characterize how we think about the world; they also characterize how we make decisions. One can, for example, observe one’s wondering mind, and contemplate whether it would be good to give up its undisciplined reign, or one can simply decide to take medicine in order to become more “productive”. Subjectivity in decision making, too, is a matter of degree. We hardly ever deliberate purely objectively or purely subjectively. But, as Laurie Paul points out in *Transformative Experience* (2015), our personal decisions often involve outcomes whose value at least partly depends on our experience; and so we cannot make rational decisions about them without framing the alternatives in the relevant experiential terms. The more radically life-altering the decision you contemplate is – such as having a child, choosing a profession, or emigrating to another country –, the harder to imagine what your life will be like after the life-altering decision; nevertheless, thinking about experience is often indispensable to good decision making.

There is also a more indirect connection between subjectivity, objectivity and deliberation. When you choose to be more subjective, you also choose to deliberate less. Of course, plans can be based in part on subjective considerations. But deliberation itself – acquiring information, analyzing and comparing outcomes, reasoning, etc. – exemplifies the kinds of thought processes characteristic of objective thinking. Subjective thinking, on the other hand, involves more expansive and slow states of mind, recognition, and not reasoning, insight and not conclusion. Of course, you will still have to make plenty of decisions. Children need to be taken care of, dinner has to be made, summer plans have to be worked out. But still, there will be fewer schemes, and more spontaneity.

Buddhist psychology holds that an excessive preoccupation with planning – and the concomitant turning away from subjective thinking – is based on a misunderstanding about the nature of the self. We orient toward planning and optimizing our condition because – to put it
a bit overly succinctly - we do not want to accept the impermanence of our condition, the unpredictability of the future and our basic lack of control over it. But the very activities that are supposed to promote our happiness make it impossible to achieve real happiness and harmony with our life. The Tibetan meditation master, Chogyam Trungpa says in “Love Story”:

Free passion is radiation without a radiator, a fluid, pervasive warmthth that flows effortlessly. It is not destructive because it is a balanced state of being and highly intelligent. Self-consciousness inhibits this intelligent, balanced state of being. By opening, by dropping our self-conscious grasping, we see not only the surface of an object, but we see the whole way through. We appreciate not in terms of sensational qualities alone, but we see in terms of whole qualities, which are pure gold.

Buddhist training involves practicing awareness of our experience without turning away from aspects of it or trying to change it to something else. One way in which this contributes to the good life is that attention amplifies the qualities of experience and makes us aware of things we were previously unaware of. But as Trungpa seems to indicate, it also benefits us by making us drop “our self-conscious grasping”. There is a trade-off between subjective engagement and conscious planning. More subjective engagement lessens one’s need and inclination to engage in deliberation. One will appreciate things for their own sake, and will do less merely to achieve a goal. The relationship also seems to work in the other way. Turning away from subjectivity can result in a quality of drivenness and striving, an overabundance of calculation.

Subjective thinking is slow. In a subjective process, one puts aside the agenda, and lives with questions without a demand for immediate answers, so insights can arise on their own time. We are often unaware of our real desires and preferences; we frequently struggle to understand our own values, or struggle with the values we have. We can’t seem to conform to our own declared principles. Our minds are difficult to understand and difficult to tame. Though deliberation presupposes that we have solved these problems, it doesn’t contribute to their resolution. Turning to subjectivity involves a process of self-discovery and a willingness to be patient. The Chinese book of divination, the I Ching, guides decisions not by providing practical solutions, but by offering an opportunity to contemplate one’s mind in an open-ended, experiential manner. Sensitivity to experience can bring about gradual transformation in an indirect, but deep way. It can also lead to better decisions with time.

Decisions sometimes happen as a result of familiar considerations presenting themselves over and over again – as, for example, in the case of having to deal with an untrustworthy friend or lover. One might have understood, in an objective, abstract sense, what is happening, and may have been at the point of trying act on it. However, it might take a peculiar process of allowing oneself to fully experience what is happening – putting aside any effort to find excuses – to finally be able to act. As Kierkegaard puts it in Either/Or,

For one may have known a thing many times and acknowledged it ... and yet it is only by the deep inward movements, only by the indescribable emotions of the heart, that
for the first time you are convinced that what you have known belongs to you ... for only the truth that edifies is truth for you.

Many or most of the important things in life happen in this way. Whether or not it makes you happy, the cultivation of subjectivity leads to a life full of meaning.

**Subjectivity and objectivity in balance**

Kierkegaard’s existentialism was a response to the ideology of the Enlightenment, according to which science and reason are the key to solving the problems of both society and individual human beings. Kierkegaard was right to emphasize the role of subjectivity in a good life. Nevertheless, his apotheosis of subjectivity, and his concomitant dismissal of science and objectivity was wrong-headed, and led to dangerous ideas. In his famous retelling of the story of Abraham and Isaac in *Fear and Trembling*, he argues that the individual who has become a subject in the fullest sense, can “suspend” both the dictates of reason and the mandates of morality.

The objective orientation has its own characteristic virtues. Excellence in one’s objective orientation requires more than just a general tendency to think in objective terms; it requires conforming to the epistemic norms of objectivity. A belief is objective in this sense if it is based on observation and reasoning that is, in principle, accessible to any third party, irrespective of his or her personal idiosyncrasies. Normative objectivity requires respect for evidence, logic, and reason, and is best embodied in science and rational decision making.

We seem to live in a strange time when the cultivation of both subjectivity and objectivity in the normative sense are scarce; but both are required for a good life. The sources of value are – for all the protestations of Kierkegaard, and his romantic contemporaries – reason as well as lived experience; they together ground intellectual, prudential, moral and aesthetic value. Shunning the virtues of objectivity can make us blind to the facts, ignorant, biased, and unfair; neglecting the virtues of subjectivity can make life empty.

My ADD diagnosis has contributed to my self-understanding; the story I had been telling myself about my drive to distraction was probably only partially true. But nothing a doctor can tell me changes the fact, that in the end, I prefer being this way.