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Author/s:
Sankey, H

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Howard Sankey*

Objective Facts

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Abstract: This is a brief exploration of the notion of an objective fact. The form of objectivity at issue is distinct from epistemic objectivity or objectivity about truth. It is an ontological form of objectivity. Objective facts may obtain whether or not we know, believe or are aware of them. They depend upon objects, for example, on the properties that objects have or the relationships into which objects enter. Setting scepticism to one side, there is a perfectly mundane sense in which we may come to have knowledge or fail to have knowledge of such facts. We must perceive objective facts from a perspective, but this does not enter into the facts. Nor does the fact that we must describe facts using language mean that facts are language-dependent.

Keywords: fact, objectivity, objective fact, perspective, knowledge

1

The word 'fact' appears to be used in (at least) two different ways. In its first use, the word refers to a linguistic item, for example, an assertion that is or is taken to be true. In its second use, the word refers to a non-linguistic item, such as a state of affairs or a particular way that the world is. It is the second use of the word 'fact' that will feature here.

Let us begin with two simple examples.

(1) The computer is on the desk.
(2) The petrol tank is empty.

These are two sentences which each assert a fact. I take it that the facts that these sentences assert are objective. They are objective facts. But what is it about these facts that makes them objective?

That is the question I will examine here. I do not aim to propose an analysis of what a fact is. Nor will I propose a theory about the nature of facts. Instead, I seek to identify the feature or features of facts that makes them objective.

***Corresponding author**: **Howard Sankey**, School of Historical and Philosophical Studies, University of Melbourne, Grattan Street, Melbourne, Victoria, 3010, Australia,
E-mail: chs@unimelb.edu.au. https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5168-150X

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I am not interested here in epistemic objectivity. That is the sort of objectivity that attaches to the methods of inquiry or to the warrant for belief. Nor am I interested in the objectivity of truth. That is the sort of objectivity which applies to an assertion which accurately reports the way the world is.

In effect, the sort of objectivity I am interested in here is a form of objectivity that underlies both epistemic objectivity and the objectivity of truth. Adopting objective methods of inquiry or being objectively warranted in belief is a reliable means of arriving at the truth about the world. An assertion about the world is true in an objective sense when it is made true by the way that the objective world is. Its truth is objective because the world is objectively that way.

It is this latter notion of objectivity that is at issue here. What is it that makes it the case that the world is objectively a particular way? I wish to approach this question by way of the idea that it is the existence of objective facts that accounts for this form of objectivity.

3

Notice, first, that I do not need to know or believe that the computer is on the desk for it to be the case that the computer is on the desk. Perhaps I think the computer is still in the box and has not yet been unpacked. Nor do I need to know that that the petrol tank is empty. I may not realize that the previous driver of the car drove it until the tank ran dry. I may only discover that it is empty when I turn the ignition key.

These points suggest that to be an objective fact is independent of whether the fact is known or believed to be obtain. Nor need one be aware of the fact for it to obtain. More generally, this suggests that an objective fact is one that obtains independently of whether anyone knows, believes, or is aware that it obtains. It is not, in other words, an epistemic state of affairs. Objectivity in this sense is an ontological state.

4

Obtaining independently of knowledge, belief or awareness appears to be one feature of the objectivity of facts. But can anything be said about the nature of facts beyond the point that they are not epistemic?

What must be the case for the computer to be on the desk? One object, the computer, must bear a relation to another object, the desk. In particular, the former object must bear the relation of being on to the latter object. As for the petrol tank being empty, a particular object, the petrol tank of the car, must be dry. It must have no petrol (or other liquid) in it. A particular object, the petrol tank, must have a particular property, namely, the property of being empty.

No attempt will be made here to give a theory of facts or to analyze the notion of a fact. But notice that in the above two cases an object either has a certain property or enters into a relation with another object. It appears, then, that a feature of objective facts is that the facts are or consist in objects having certain properties or entering into certain relations with other objects. If this is right, then the notion of objectivity, as it applies to facts, has a connection with the notion of an object. It is the way the objects are that makes the objective facts what they are.

5

One might agree that there are objective facts in the sense outlined above. Still, one might wonder whether it is possible to know that such facts exist or obtain. After all, the way that the objects in the world are is independent of whether we know, believe or are aware that they exist. Objective facts are not, as we have seen, epistemic states of affairs.

One line of discussion here proceeds by way of scepticism. We may argue that knowledge requires certainty, we are unable to obtain certainty, so we are unable to acquire knowledge. Or we may argue that it is not possible to show that we are not subject to a massive illusion at the hands of a Cartesian demon, and, if we cannot show that, then we cannot know that anything outside of our minds exists.

We may agree that, if such extreme forms of scepticism are correct, then we may have no knowledge of objective facts. That is one reason why it is important to defeat the sceptic. It is important to be able to show that we may have knowledge of objective facts. I shall not attempt that task here.

Let us suppose, instead, that the sceptic is mistaken. Does that mean that we may have knowledge of objective facts? Of course, I may not be aware that the computer is on the desk, since I believe that it remains in its box. I may not know that the petrol tank is empty, since I seem to remember that it was full the last time that I drove the car. But in both of these cases there is something I can do to acquire knowledge. I can go into the office and look at my desk. I can turn the ignition key and look at the fuel gauge.

There is a perfectly mundane sense in which we may fail to have knowledge of objective facts. At the same time, there is a perfectly mundane sense in which we may have such knowledge. In many cases, it is just a matter of looking. It is a matter of appropriately employing one's senses in appropriate circumstances.

6

If our senses play a role in arriving at knowledge of objective facts, a question of perspective arises. For we must always view the world from some perspective. I cannot view the world without viewing it from somewhere, for example, from the position where I am located when I observe an object or situation.

When I am seated at the desk directly in front of the computer, I perceive the computer from the perspective of someone sitting directly in front of the computer. When I look behind the computer to see where to insert a wire, I perceive the computer from behind the computer rather than from in front of the computer. If I observe the computer from the doorway, I perceive the computer at an angle from several metres away.

It seems inescapable that I must perceive an object from a particular perspective. Does this raise any issues about the objectivity of the facts? Here two points seem apposite.

First, even if I may observe the computer and the desk from different perspectives, I may still come to know that the computer is on the desk. Perspective does not seem to stand in the way of knowledge of this fact. Second, the perspective from which I view the computer and the desk is not, as it were, built into the fact that the computer is on the desk. The fact is that one object, the computer, bears the relation of being on to another object, the desk. Nothing about the perspective from which I view the computer forms part of the relationship that obtains between the computer and the desk.

Of course, one might notice that if one observes the computer from the doorway, one sees that there is dust on the desk behind the computer that one does not see from directly in front of the computer. It is, in other words, a fact that if one observes the computer from the doorway, one sees dust on the desk behind the computer that is not visible from directly in front of the computer. But this is a different fact from the fact that the computer is on the desk. It is a fact about what may be seen behind the computer from the doorway. That is a different fact from the fact about the relation of the computer to the desk.

7

Does language play no role in objective facts in the sense at issue here? After all, in asserting the fact that the computer is on the desk I must use language. Is there any reason to suppose that the fact that has been asserted to obtain really does obtain independently of the language employed to describe it? Might not the fact itself depend upon the way in which it is described? Perhaps facts are relative to language.

There are several ways this thought might be developed. One way is as follows. In the assertion, 'The computer is on the desk', a certain relationship is taken to obtain. The relationship is the relation "X is on Y", i.e., the relation of being on something. Just what this relationship is depends upon the meaning of the words that are employed to express it. When one asserts that one object is on another object, one asserts that the former object is located in such a way that it physically rests upon the latter. The two objects must physically touch each other in such a way that the one supports the other. The supported object would fall if the supporting object were removed.

But there is no need to think that the relationship just described depends in any way on the existence or use of the language in describing the relationship. It is clear that one and the same fact may be described in a number of different ways. But the relationship exists in the world independently of the way in which it is described. The words that are used in describing the fact refer to the objects and the relationship between the objects. They do not in any way constitute or contribute to the existence of the fact. There is no need, therefore, to suppose that facts depend upon or are relative to language.