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# Commentary on: Moira Howes's "Does happiness increase the objectivity of arguers?"

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Does happiness increase the objectivity of arguers? Howes's view is that it does, and in support of this claim she draws on two main lines of argument. One focuses on the relationship between objectivity, social intelligence and the creation of more positive intellectual communities. The second focuses on psychological research which purports to show how positive affect might enhance arguer and audience objectivity.

With respect to her overarching claim, I would certainly not disagree with her contention that we should find ways to elucidate, value and support happiness. In addition, I find myself in agreement with some specific claims, for example, that a certain type of community is important for objectivity (critical thinking), that there is a connection between emotion or affect and objectivity (critical thinking), and, more broadly, that psychological research can be relevant to discussions of critical thinking (for example, the cognitive bias research).

Where I shall focus my commentary is on her conception of the two main concepts which underpin the central claim, objectivity and happiness, and on her account of the relationship between them.

## 2. OBJECTIVITY

There are two salient aspects to the view of objectivity which Howes puts forward: one, that it involves acquiring (or attempting to acquire) an understanding of reality which is unbiased; and two, that it involves a commitment which is social.

The idea of acquiring an unbiased view of reality captures what I think is a central feature of the concept of objectivity. My own characterization of objectivity would be in terms of giving fair-minded consideration to arguments on all sides of an issue, and avoiding bias in evaluating positions and arguments and in making judgments.

The idea that objectivity involves a social commitment is less obvious. I would characterize objectivity as an achievement rather than as primarily a commitment, implying not only effort or intention but also some degree of success in acquiring the unbiased view. Moreover, the idea that objectivity is primarily social I find problematic. Objectivity can be, and often is, ascribed to individuals -- an

individual can be objective in his or her evaluations and judgments, and the habit of mind or virtue of fair-mindedness is an instantiation of objectivity. One might say that a community of inquirers could exhibit objectivity in terms of how they collaboratively evaluate views and make judgments. Moreover, the promotion of certain aspects of the 'critical spirit' within a community of inquiry (e.g., fair-mindedness, seriously listening to others' views and treating them with respect) could foster objectivity among members of the community. I also agree with Howes that a diversity of perspectives is important and thus a critical consideration of alternative views is essential to attaining objectivity, although this type of consideration can be undertaken by an individual thinking through an issue on his or her own. Another way in which objectivity might be seen to be social is that, in order to make a reasoned judgment one needs to refer to public reasons, and not reasons which are private or subjective. In these ways I can see a social dimension to objectivity. I suspect, however, that my take falls considerably short of Howes's view that any account of objectivity should begin with the social.

### 3. HAPPINESS

The paper makes its claim with respect to two different senses of happiness, subjective happiness and eudaimonic happiness. These are very distinct notions, however, and one does not necessarily imply the other. A person might well, at some moments, feel subjectively happy because of some passing circumstance or incident even while not living well in the Aristotelian sense. Moreover, we might think that a Socrates, even dissatisfied, might achieve eudaimonia. Thus it is important not to conflate the two senses and to examine the claim regarding the connection of objectivity and happiness with respect to each sense.

#### *3.1 Subjective happiness*

Howes's claim that subjective happiness increases the objectivity of arguers draws support from the psychological literature which casts doubt on the claim that depressed people have more realistic perceptions of reality. What the inconclusiveness of this literature reinforces for me is the belief that the relationship between subjective happiness and objectivity is a contingent one. How accurate a perception one has of reality is likely independent of the emotional cast which one brings to that reality. One might have an optimistic or a pessimistic outlook on the same reality. Those who see the glass as half empty and those who see it as half full could well have an equally accurate and objective view of the quantity of liquid in the glass. The issue seems less a question of objectivity and more a matter of emotional framing.

This brings us to Howes's discussion of the role of emotion with respect to patterns of salience and thereby to objectivity. Howes points out, rightly I believe, that objectivity requires us to pay attention to relevant features of reality and that emotions affect what we pay attention to. And emotions can often lead us to pay attention to what is important and relevant. Just as often, however, emotions may distort perception, cause us to misread evidence or give undue prominence to

certain factors. And this is not just the case for negative emotions. An overly positive or 'happy' view of someone might cause one to fail to notice negative behaviours which could lead to significant problems or risks. Thus there is a need for an 'objective' critical examination of the appropriateness of one's emotions. So, although Howes may be correct that emotion regulation of a certain sort is necessary for objectivity, I would also want to claim that appropriately regulating one's emotions requires critical evaluation and thus objectivity.

I agree that the interconnectedness of emotion and reason does indeed have important implications for the enhancement of objectivity, and critical thinking more broadly. I see this not in terms of enhancing happiness in order to enhance objectivity, however, but rather in terms of fostering positive emotions with respect to the enterprise and virtues of critical thinking, for example encouraging such 'rational passions' as intellectual curiosity, a love of truth and distaste for bias, and a respect for the arguments of others.

### *3.2 Eudaimonic happiness*

What of the second claim, that eudaimonic happiness increases the objectivity of arguers? This claim is based on the argument that eudaimonic well-being is an essential element of good social epistemic relations and that good social epistemic relations are important for objective argumentation. An implication of this tripartite relationship is that we should support eudaimonic happiness in argumentative contexts in order to promote good social epistemic relations which in turn will support objectivity.

Now I would agree that there is a relationship between eudaimonia and critical thinking (and hence objectivity), but I would characterize the nature of that relationship somewhat differently than does Howes. Eudaimonia, in the Aristotelian sense, comes in fulfilling our human purposes, i.e., living in accordance with reason. Thus, on this account, critical thinking (and hence objectivity) is constitutive of eudaimonic happiness. So it's not so much that eudaimonia is a means to the end of objectivity in argumentation. It is rather that part of what it means to live well is to engage in rational pursuits and rational exchanges.

This brings us to another of the key ideas in Howes's paper, that of community. Engaging in rational pursuits and rational exchanges requires being a part of and taking part in a certain sort of community, a community of inquiry. Such a community aims at rational inquiry and thus an unbiased view of reality. In addition, it is characterized by what Howes calls good epistemic (social) relations, which I would cash out in terms of open-minded and fair-minded exchanges and a commitment to respectful treatment, meaningful participation, and productive interaction. A moral I take from Howes's view, then, regards the importance of finding ways to foster communities of inquiry, where rational inquiry is a goal and in which epistemic social and intellectual virtues are promoted and encouraged. Participating in such a community is a means for living well, in the eudaimonic sense. And if we are successful in our educational task, then people will also feel happy and enthusiastic about participating in such a community and will be positively disposed toward the enterprise and virtues of critical thinking.