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Commentary on “On Being Objective: Hard Data, Soft Data and Baseball”

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Professor Gilbert argues that someone who responds to an attempt by an interlocutor to introduce “soft data” into a discussion by saying things like “you’re not being objective” or “you have to look at it objectively” is probably using the notion of objectivity abusively and fallaciously. Such a person, he suggests, violates the first rule of pragma-dialectics according to which “parties must not prevent each other from advancing or casting doubt on standpoints” (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1987, p. 284). He gives examples. In one, Jack tells his wife Jill that she is not being objective when Jill says that she is frightened by the idea of their 19-year-old daughter going to a distant University. Hard data shows that that University has the best program in their daughter’s proposed area of study, says Jack, and so that’s where she should go. Jill’s emotional response is ruled out. In another, the Globe and Mail raises the question whether the Blue Jays should agree to a lengthy extension of veteran Jose Bautista’s contract (Bautista, 2016). Bautista’s greatness, his charismatic, crowd-drawing brilliance, are obvious, says the Globe, but if we are rational – not emotional – we’ll see that “[a]s a long-term investment at maximum cost” the aging Bautista is “a quantifiable bad risk.” And we should be rational. Like Jack, the Globe improperly rules emotion out of the argument, fallaciously privileging hard data.

But I’m not so sure. Soft data is, I think, properly excluded from some arguments. Some arguments, that is to say, should turn exclusively on what Professor Gilbert calls hard data. Some arguments should turn exclusively on soft data. I make a mistake of some sort when I suddenly introduce statistics in those arguments. And some arguments readily admit both hard and soft data. In those arguments I make a mistake if I exclude data because it is one kind or the other. Whether I’m making a mistake in excluding data because of the kind of data it is depends upon which kind of argument I’m in, and which kind of argument and argument I’m in will depend, I think, upon the goal or telos of that argument.

Before trying to spell this out in a little more detail and apply it to Professor Gilbert’s examples, it’s important to note that there are a couple of lines in Professor Gilbert’s paper which suggest that he thinks something like this too. Jack might reconsider his response to Jill and move to an “affirming” sense of objectivity, allowing emotions or other feelings relevant to the decision or result to be treated as data. When he does so, Professor Gilbert says, he is “in pragma-dialectic terms returning to the opening stage and arguing about whether or not emotional material qualifies as data” (Gilbert, 2016). Later Professor Gilbert describes different ways to understand objectivity, ranging from the ‘positivist’ sense in which only data that can be publically or scientifically verified is admissible in a good argument through to the affirming sense just described, and says that “[p]erhaps so long as there is an Opening Stage agreement” (Gilbert, 2016) – I assume an agreement about which sense is being used in the argument – then using one rather than another need not be objectionable. And again, “[t]here is not one form of

data that is more compelling than another, and it is the context, culture, and specific issue that should determine what is and is not permissible in an argument” (Gilbert, 2016).

These comments suggest that which sense of objectivity can legitimately be deployed in an exchange can be settled by agreement between the parties “at the opening stage” of their discussion or by the “context, culture, and specific issue” at hand. If agreement, context, culture, or the nature of an issue can settle which of the available senses of objectivity are appropriate to a particular argument, then it seems that there are different kinds of argument and that the form of objectivity appropriate to them can change. If that’s right, then the fact that someone said “you’re not being objective” or “you have to look at it objectively” or “but let’s be rational and not emotional” does not settle whether they are using the notion of objectivity abusively and fallaciously. It will depend upon agreement, context, culture, or the nature of an issue.

One way to put my response to Professor Gilbert, then, is to say that if these comments had been given greater emphasis, some of the stronger conclusions about Jack and the Globe and Mail may have seemed less warranted.

Let me start with the Globe and Mail case since I think it’s a bit more straightforward. In the editorial, the paper’s sports writer begins by asking “how should we judge the future value of Jose Bautista?” They quite explicitly note that there are emotional and rational aspects to the answer to that question: The title of the editorial is “Jose Bautista, the Blue Jays and reason vs. passion in the business of baseball”; “No other sport,” they opine, “so successfully integrates emotional drama with rational calculation.” They explain why one might “feel good” about Bautista. Before the Blue Jays he’d “been tossed … from team to team without ever hinting at his potential greatness.” For the Jays he was an unlikely star: “his charismatic, crowd-drawing brilliance, showcased in a defiant bat-flip for the ages after hitting a game-changing home run in the American League Division Series…” And now Bautista wants to cash in and secure “a lengthy contract that would see him paid at baseball’s top rate into his forties.” But the Globe reminds readers that allowing decisions about contract extensions to be governed by emotions or passions has led franchises to make bad decisions, to lock themselves into contracts with players whose performance the statistics, the hard data, tells us is almost certain to trail off as they age. That’s why the final paragraph of the editorial begins “[b]ut let’s be rational and not emotional.”

It seems to me, then, that the Globe editorial is close to the model “opening stage” meta-discussion, of what role emotion and passion – Professor Gilbert’s soft data – should have in a subsequent discussion on Jose Bautista’s request for a contract extension. The Globe does not simply exclude emotional or affective considerations from the discussion: it gives an argument for doing so.

I turn to the discussion between Jack and Jill about their 19-year-old daughter’s study plans. I’m happy to defend the Globe editorial, but Jack is plainly a jerk. He would be of course: Professor Gilbert has made him that way. Jack initially shuts Jill down; then, when he begins to improve, it’s because he has a patronising attitude, first to Jill – after all, she’s not a lawyer so she doesn’t really know how to argue, does she? – and, when he gets better still, to the women he works with who it seems all do family law and conduct their cases on the basis of appeals to emotion. Indeed, even when he gets it right, Jack is an ass. Having discovered “affirming objectivity,” Jack responds to Jill’s expression of her fear about their daughter being so far away by saying “I can understand your being frightened. Honestly I find it scary too.”

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1 And they’re right: the web is full of pages with titles such as “Ten Worst MLB Contracts” and most of them are long term contracts which commit franchises to paying tens of millions of dollars to underperforming former stars.
Now, we’re told, “the emotional data has been allowed into the discussion. This soft-data now becomes grist for the argumentative mill rather than being ruled out of court.” Perhaps, but notice that, in this passage at least, we don’t see just how those responses feature in the argument. Jack has added his emotional response, but now what? We know they both feel uneasy – or at least that Jack has told Jill he does. If he could stop being a jerk for a minute, he might put that by saying something like, “Look, I do feel nervous about her being so far away. But this is a decision that might have far reaching implications for her. I really think she should go to the best school she can, even if that means we have a stressful year or two. What do you think? Am I right about that?” Jill might respond, “Well, I can see you might look at it like that, but I think our feelings are relevant. Sophie will know how we feel. She’ll feel uncomfortable knowing that she’s making us unhappy. And that’s likely to make her studies go less well. We just can’t take our feeling out of the picture.”

Now I’m with the new improved Jack here (I would be inclined to say we should talk to Sophie and tell her how we feel and see what she thinks: I’m guessing she might like to put some distance between herself and her patronising father and overly-protective mother) but still this would be the opening moves in a preliminary meta-discussion about the sort of data which should be admitted onto the discussion about Sophie. But if one accepts this sort of account then it seems too quick to say that someone who says “you’re not being objective” or “you have to look at it objectively” or “but let’s be rational and not emotional” is using the notion of objectivity abusively and fallaciously: we need to know more, and in particular we need to identify the end or goal of their discussion.

Perhaps in the Jack and Jill case the matter must be settled by agreement. The context won’t do it. But in many other cases it seems likely that the context will: it’s just obvious I get things wrong if I raise emotional issues in my physics exam. For my own part, I don’t want my physician being distracted from the hard evidence about my diagnosis. And I might interrupt a romantic interlude with my beloved by giving her the statistics on the likelihood of relationships between people of our ages and professions lasting, but probably I should shelve that discussion for another time. And, if I know that the performance of the players on the team I coach is affected by confidence, as well as by knowledge of the team plan and basic skills, I might reasonably try to make them feel good about themselves when I talk about ways we’re going to take on the next team. But the fact that there are contexts in which passion and emotion ought to be given a role shouldn’t make us think it is always so: Again, whether I’m making a mistake in excluding data because of the kind of data it is depends upon which kind of argument I’m in, and which kind of argument and argument I’m in will depend upon the goal or telos of that argument.

I’ve suggested that there’s some evidence to suggest that Professor Gilbert might not disagree with everything in my response. He appears to agree that whether it is abusive and fallacious to exclude soft data will depend upon agreement and context. There is another theme in his paper, however, which might case doubt on that reading. At times it seems that Professor Gilbert has a much bolder thesis, according to which the preference for hard data is a symptom of the lingering grip of pre-Wittgensteinian positivism, an offensively masculine stance, which portrays us as machines or Vulcans. This bolder stance would explain why the Globe cops it: from this perspective Professor Gilbert doesn’t really want to defend the modest thesis that there are contexts in which one should recognise that emotional or affective considerations deserve...
equal weight in an argument. He has a much grander goal, viz., convincing us that it is always (almost always?) wrong not to give priority to soft data.

I am deeply sceptical about this bolder claim. There is of course “hard data” which may seem to support the bolder claim: Jonathan Haidt, for instance, argues that reason is merely the mahout on an emotional elephant, providing post-fact rationalisations of immediate affective judgements (Haidt 2012). But even this research acknowledges the capacity for our emotional judgements to lead us astray – perhaps to deny our children important opportunities because of our natural paternal or maternal emotions, or to take on long term commitments because marketers skilled in bypassing reason manage to persuade us that we really do need a new car. Haidt and others (Mercier and Sperber 2011 for instance) see value in the opportunity that discussion and argument provide to check the reliability of our immediate affective reactions. It’s one thing to argue for appropriate recognition of the role of passion and emotion in arguments, another to sideline reason altogether: we should be objective about that.

References


