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On Being Objective: Hard Data, Soft Data and Baseball

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Abstract: “Objective” often refers to ways of thinking that are explicitly “rational,” and contains an ideology that denigrates emotion and other communicative aspects in favour of an idealized sense of fact, data and truth. The underlying idea holds there is a way of thinking, deciding, arguing that is at best impervious and at least resistant to personal beliefs, attitudes and perspectives. I will explore objections to this view.

Keywords: argumentation, baseball, emotion, emotion in argument, feminist argumentation, objectivity, pragma-dialectics

1. Objectivity and data

The term ‘objective,’ when used in its adjectival form has a core sense, though not one that is terribly stable. Variations in context, culture and speaker will change the meaning and impact of the term. At one extreme it is an honorific that is abused as a form of masculinist approbation that excludes or limits the introduction of non-linear communicative considerations into argument and decision-making. I will refer to this as the abusive form. At the other end it can serve as a way of admitting the self-same aspects into consideration by identifying them as what they are. This I will call the perspective form. Before going further I want to clarify one point. As I do not have the time or space to argue this point, I am taking it as a working assumption. ‘Objective’ is sometimes taken to mean “completely devoid of emotion.” This is typically when used in the abusive form, and is, I claim philosophically impossible insofar as human minds simply do not work that way (Damasio, 1994). We are humans, not Vulcans, al la Star Trek, and it is not possible for us to completely exclude the emotional aspect from our considerations. We may try, and succeed to a greater or lesser degree, but that is getting ahead of myself.

To begin with let’s list some common phrases using ‘objective.’

1. You’re not being objective.
2. You have to look at it objectively.
3. Objectively, the best choice is...
4. Being objective, I’d have to say...

Generally speaking, 1 and 2 are in the abusive camp, while 3 and 4 are not.¹

What does it mean to say that 1 is an example of the abusive form [AF]? When, for example, Jack tells Jill she is not being objective, he indicates that she is being something else. Typically, though not necessarily, Jack means that Jill is being emotional, and, more specifically, Jill is “allowing emotion to cloud her judgment.” Even if we suppose that there is no way to completely remove emotional considerations from argument or decision-making that by no means signifies that objectivity is a meaningless concept. So wherein does the abuse lie? It lies

¹ I am purposely being ambiguous here because depending on context any expression can be used to mean anything.

precisely in Jack's preventing Jill from putting forward a standpoint. According to van Eemeren and Grootendorst's first rule of pragma-dialectics this is a fallacy. The rule is as follows.

Rule I: Parties must not prevent each other from advancing or casting doubt on standpoints.

In principle, everyone is entitled to advance a point of view on any subject and to call any standpoint into question, whatever it may refer to. Rule I is broken if a discussant tries to impose certain restrictions on the standpoints that may be advanced or called into question, or to restrict the fundamental right of the other party to advance or cast doubt on whatever standpoint she or he likes. (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1987)

Which means that insofar as Jack is preventing Jill from putting forward an argument from a non-logical perspective, Jack is committing a fallacy. In particular, if Jill wants to present an emotionally based argument and Jack cuts it off by his assertion that she is not being objective, then he is in violation. I say this is a violation because Jack's definition of objective is too narrow. For him, being objective means using facts that can be publicly or scientifically checked or verified and avoids emotions, intuitions, and social and cultural factors. We will call such data, "hard data." Jack's view, if I may, is positivist, and suffers from the numerous faults of that view in a post-Wittgenstein world. Let us call this view objective-P. and describe it as follows.

Objective-P [O-P]: Only data that can be publically or scientifically verified is admissible in a good argument.

Obviously, we all, including Jack, use data that does not meet that strict criterion, so O-P does not help very much.

Before we go any further it might help to introduce an example. Let's suppose that Jack and Jill have a daughter, Sophie, who will shortly be graduating from high school and heading off to university. Jack believes the best school for her to attend is far enough away to require an air flight or very long drive. Jill, on the other hand, wants Sophie to attend a commuter university in their home city of Edmonton. They each have their reasons. Jack argues that since Sophie wants to major in clinical psychology she should attend York University in Toronto, which has Canada's most renowned programme in that field. Jill says she knows that, but hates the idea of Sophie being so far away.

Jack argued that if Sophie wants to do clinical psychology she should attend the best programme available. After all, she's worked very hard to get top grades, and it would be silly to settle for less than the best. Jack produced data from several university measurement indices, magazines, and various rankings to make his point. Also, he argued, going away to school would increase her sense of independence and better prepare her for the real world. Jill responded that there are very good programmes right there in Edmonton, and all those rankings are controversial. Besides, Sophie is too young to be so far away from home, and the idea of her being so far away frightens Jill.

When Jack applies O-P, he retorts that Jill's reasons are not based on facts, but feelings and fears. As such they are not relevant to the decision and should be ignored. Jill responds that they should certainly not be ignored and are completely legitimate. The discussion has potential

for degenerating into a row, so they decide to take a break. During the break, Jack has a couple of beers, relaxes, and decides he may have been too harsh. As a lawyer he is always conditioned to be logical and ignore everything but the facts. Still, he recently read Gilbert's *Arguing with People* (2014) and decides he may have been too narrow-minded. After all, Jill's not a lawyer so she doesn't really know how to argue, does she? And Gilbert did say that you can't ignore emotion in arguments, and even though Jack didn't really agree with that, he should lighten up. Unbeknownst to him, Jack was moving to a looser sense of objective, one that is more moderate.

Objective-M (O-M): Data that can be publically or scientifically verified can be admissible as evidence in an argument, but strong feelings should be considered and not summarily dismissed.

O-M allows that we can talk about strong feelings, but does not accept them as evidence. When Jill says that having Sophie so far away will be frightening for her, Jack will now listen and not attempt to squelch her. But being frightened does not, under O-M provide evidence for their decision. On this definition the feelings are objective because there is no question that they exist, but they are not sufficiently objective to make them relevant to the decision process. Now when Jill says that she is frightened and Jill is too young to be all alone Jack can accept these as reasons. He will not dismiss her, but will also not give those reasons the same status as his "objective" reasons (Campbell, 1994). Jack can now say that he disagrees with her feeling that Sophie is too young, and they can discuss that.

Jill: Sophie's never been away from home for that long, and she's just too young.

Jack: Well, several thousand equally young women and men go away to school each year and do well and survive. She will be 19 after all.

Jill: But she's a young 19.

Jack (smiles ruefully): You better not tell her that.

Jill: Well it frightens me that she'll be so far away. What if something happens to her? We'd be nowhere near to help.

Jack: That's true, but you're just being emotional, and that's not a good reason to keep her out of the best programme.

Notice that Jack is not cutting Jill off. He's allowing her to express her reasons, and even, to a point, addressing them. However, his phrase, "you're just being emotional, and that's not a good reason," betrays his understanding of objectivity. She can express her reason, but not expect him to consider it seriously because it is emotional. To be emotional is to be not logical, and for the patriarchy being not logical means not having anything to say. As Lakoff (1990) argued, when men set the ground rules for what is logical, then women who do not follow those rules are illogical (p. 202). According to Lakoff (1990) and others, (e.g., Maltz & Borker, 1982; Spender, 1985; Verbiest, 1995), there is a disadvantage that women face because their preferred mode of communication is not lodged firmly in the critical-logical [C-L] model (Gilbert, 1994). When Jack disallows Jill's appeal to emotion he is applying the dominance of the C-L perspective in rational thinking. Feelings are not data.

There are other factors in the communication differences between women and men that go beyond emotion, though they are certainly related. The style of communication also plays a factor, as argued by Gilligan (1982) and Rooney (2010). Conflict is something women have

often been socialized to avoid, whereas for men it is a routine, expected and often embraced part of life. But times are changing, and one senses that more men are aware of their emotions and those of their female partners and colleagues. Jack's law practice, as it turns out, has several women partners and associates, and it has behooved everyone in the office to become more open to a wider variety of communication perspectives. Having been in discussions concerning cases in family law, Jack witnessed instances in which the so-called facts were not nearly so important as the emotions and attitudes involved. As a result, Jack has moved to a more affirming sense of objectivity.

Objective-A [O-A]: Data that can be publically or scientifically verified can be admissible as evidence in an argument. In addition, emotions or other feelings that are relevant to the decision or result will also be taken as data.

What does it mean to take emotions and such like as data? One way of thinking about this is to acknowledge that no data is ever pure and devoid of values and feelings – even the axioms of mathematics ultimately lie on a sense of their rightness (Gilbert, 2010). When we find data we do not like, data we feel is untrustworthy, we normally subject it to further investigation. The same thing applies to feelings. If someone puts forward a feeling and it does not seem sincere, then we are likely and entitled to doubt or at least question it (Gilbert, 1997). Our life experience comes into play when we assess reactions and judge appearances. Analogous to labeling the data from O-P hard data let me call such data “soft data,” and suggest that we are constantly judging its quality and veracity.

We all judge information on a number of scales. One important scale is just how important the information is to us. A real sun worshipper will demand more evidence than a newspaper article before she abandons her tanning, whereas someone less committed may promptly take to hats and SPF 30. One who wants to can choose to ignore or rationalize almost anything (Gilbert, 2000).

OK, but now let's get back to Jack and Jill. We will repeat the dialogue up until Jack's last comment.

Jill: Sophie's never been away from home for that long, and she's just too young.

Jack: Well, several thousand equally young women and men go away to school each year and do well and survive. She will be 19 after all.

Jill: But she's a young 19.

Jack (smiles ruefully): You better not tell her that.

Jill: Well it frightens me that she'll be so far away. What if something happens to her? We'd be nowhere near to help.

Jack: I can understand you're being frightened. Honestly, I find it scary too.

Jill: You do?

Jack: Of course. If it were up to me she'd still be using training wheels.

Now 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. This is how discussions proceed fruitfully and quarrels are avoided. Often, when data is disallowed, e.g., it is declared by one participant as “not data,” then there must be a meta-discussion regarding the rules of proceeding. This means, in pragma-dialectic terms returning to the opening stage and arguing about whether

or not emotional material qualifies as data (Gilbert, 2006). Allowing it certainly does not guarantee agreement, but it does mean that the argument will remain focused on the issue rather than side bars.

2. An example

I said earlier that objectivity does have a meaning and can be useful. I admit that given my metaphysics it is very tempting to claim that there is no real distinction between hard and soft data. I say tempting because I suspect it is true. However, for our purposes here it is not necessary to make an assertion that might detract from the main enterprise. Therefore I will allow that what has been referred to as hard data will, depending on audience values and contextual space, have agreed upon means of measurement and identification. So my saying that right now in Ajijic, Mexico on March 1, 2016 it is sunny and 24° is hard data and difficult to question. This may be opposed to an assertion such as, “It’s really delightful here right now.” However, it is important that we realize that both are data.

The example I want to look at is an argument that appeared in the *Globe and Mail*, Canada’s pre-eminent newspaper, on February 25th 2016 [See Appendix]. First, some background. In 2015 the Toronto Blue Jays had their best season in over 20 years. Not only did they make into the playoffs, but they won their first round, and their second. They only lost in the penultimate round to the Kansas City Royals, ceding the American league championship and, consequently, not playing in the World Series. The only other important piece of information is that the first half of the season was undistinguished. In the middle of the season after several trades for players who were not individually outstanding, the team turned around and began playing unbelievably well. When a team performs as the Blue Jays did it is impossible to pinpoint the reasons; when a team comes together rather than has two or three super stars who account for most wins, the analysis is mystifying. Witness the following quote.

“This season, this incredible, unlikely, out-of-nowhere miracle of a season, has been made possible by a perfect alignment of stars, with free-agent-to-be general manager Anthopoulos calibrating everything with a sextant blessed by Midas.

“And luck. Incredible, blind, impossible-to-predict luck.” (Grange, 2015)

Of course, “luck” and a “sextant blessed by Midas” are emotional expressions. But then baseball is an emotional game. Teams have “chemistry,” they will “click” or not. Batting and pitching slumps are acknowledged to be at least as psychological as physical, if not more so. Indeed, teams often have psychologists specially trained to deal with sports. In the middle of the magic mix that was the Blue Jays 2015 season was a player named Jose Bautista, and the editorial to be examined concerns him and his future with the Blue Jays. There is no question that Bautista is an excellent player and that he hit 40 home runs that season. His presence on the team and in the clubhouse was generally considered to be one of the elements that made everything happen. The question the *Globe* addressed in its editorial is what sort of contract should Bautista be offered for the coming seasons.

The *Globe* grants that he was a star in 2015, and states: “Anyone who watched Mr. Bautista lead the Toronto Blue Jays through their wonderful 2015 season can recognize his greatness – as well as his charismatic, crowd-drawing brilliance...” They even mention his bat

flip. But the Globe is concerned. Bautista wants a long term contract "...that would see him paid at baseball's top rate into his forties." And, as we all know, that's quite an old age for an athlete. The Globe (2016) writes:

Living in the hopeful present, mere months after Mr. Bautista had yet another year for the ages, we may be reluctant to foresee his inevitable decline and fall. He has been an outlier so far – long may he continue to defy norms and defeat expectations.

And now comes the crunch.

But let's be rational and not emotional. As a long-term investment at maximum cost, he's a quantifiable bad risk. If you run a business, or a team, you know that capital diverted to Mr. Bautista in his golden years means less to invest in emerging stars of income and opportunity. Nothing personal, it's just the odds – and baseball is nothing if not a game of odds. [my emphasis]

The good news is that the Globe is not eschewing emotional data. It acknowledges its existence, but decides, in the end it is outweighed by logical forces. They mention his charisma and brilliance, and what a crowd-pleaser he is. They also allow that baseball is a careful mix of emotion and logic. It is worthwhile to note that the Globe does make a separation between the two, and when it states: "But let's be rational and not emotional." With that assertion the Globe is making that separation qualitative. The rational part is that Jose Bautista will, if given a long-term contract, be past his best playing years but still being paid top dollar. Therefore, it does not "make sense" to offer him a multi-year contract of, perhaps, seven years.

The question remains: if the Globe has opened to door to emotional reasons is there an obligation to play them out fully and carefully? That seems reasonable, and if so, there are important emotional aspects that need to be allowed in. The Globe focused on Bautista's crowd pleasing, but did not mention his role in the clubhouse and as a team leader. Everyone acknowledges that what precipitates a season such as the Jays is ineffable and a mix of multiple factors. Certainly skill is essential and they are measurable by baseball's obsession with statistics. But just as essential are the emotional factors such as the drive to win, the feeling of being a team, and a host of other mysterious ingredients. Skill alone will not do it—rich teams that have bought the best players are not always the winners. There is more that is difficult to identify.

The Globe is trying to make an objective argument regarding a looming contract for Mr. Bautista. They do so by considering factors they call rational, and I will call logical, and weigh them against emotional considerations. In doing so they are correct in allowing the idea of emotional data, but fail in the end by not arguing as strongly for the emotional factors as the logical.

3. Conclusion

The different senses of 'objective' being discussed apply to the types of data allowed into an argument. These senses can range from O-P, a quite strict positivist sense, to O-A, an affirming inclusive sense. Perhaps so long as there is an Opening Stage agreement the sense is not value-laden. My concern, however, is when 'objective' is used in its narrow sense as an honorific that

excludes other arguments and reasons. A wide sense of ‘objective’ does not, in any way, simply affirm wild emotions and fears as compelling reasons. Rather, they must first be legitimate and grounded, and, secondly, not be taken as more powerful than other forms of data. It is this that precludes the demagoguery now being exhibited by Mr. Trump. His arguments are purely emotional and ignore much hard data which ought also be included in the reasoning of his supporters.

My position is very simple. We do, in fact, use emotion in our arguing practices. How we feel, how strongly we feel, the roots of our feelings are all important for understanding positions and changing minds. There 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. The Globe is well known as a business orientated newspaper, and would be expected to hold that a major financial decision should be made, first and foremost, based on how the investment will pay off. What is ignored, is that the very assumption about investments is an emotional one. Moreover, what they choose to include as relevant data, primarily age and athletic ability, as opposed to team dynamics and fan support, are also emotional decisions. All types of data can be good or bad. The fact that fear-mongering is emotional does not exclude it from a negative evaluation, and that fact that athletes perform less well as they age is also legitimate data. It is the data that must be judged, not its source; doing that is an *ad hominem*.

4. Appendix

Future Considerations,
The Globe and Mail, 26 Feb 2016.

How do you judge the future value of Jose Bautista? There are places where this is a meaningless question, because a 35 year-old man playing a child’s game lacks intrinsic worth when set against the eternal problems of war, famine, poverty and despair.

But if baseball is a distraction from ultimate seriousness, the pleasures it offers are still real and the problems it presents remain potent. No other sport so successfully integrates emotional drama with rational calculation – and this is true even in spring training, where Mr. Bautista has made it clear he’s expecting a huge pay rise from his employers at Rogers Communications.

Anyone who watched Mr. Bautista lead the Toronto Blue Jays through their wonderful 2015 season can recognize his greatness – as well as 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 last October.

But that was then. Mr. Bautista has reached the final year of a long-term contract with the Blue Jays that turned out to be very much in the team’s favour – simply because he outperformed all reasonable expectations as a late-blooming superstar who’d been tossed about from team to team without ever hinting at his potential greatness. Now he’s demanding a lengthy contract that would see him paid at baseball’s top rate into his forties. He’s publicly stated his refusal to negotiate terms, and dismissed the idea that his bond with Toronto and its fans might lead him to offer what’s known in the loyalty-averse world of professional sports as a “hometown discount.”

Sports franchises have a history of overpaying for past performance, for squandering future dollars on historic reputation. Living in the hopeful present, mere months after Mr. Bautista had yet another year for the ages, we may be reluctant to foresee his inevitable decline and fall. He has been an outlier so far – long may he continue to defy norms and defeat expectations.

But let’s be rational and not emotional. As a long-term investment at maximum cost, he’s a quantifiable bad risk. If you run a business, or a team, you know that capital diverted to Mr. Bautista in his golden years means less to invest in emerging stars of income and opportunity. Nothing personal, it’s just the odds – and baseball is nothing if not a game of odds.

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