



THE MYTH OF OBJECTIVITY

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Webster defines ‘objectivity’ as “the quality or state of being objective.” He also says that it is “external reality” as opposed to “mental” or “subjective reality.” When a matter or opinion is objective it is in the words of Webster “uninfluenced by emotion, surmise, or personal opinion.” In philosophy, ‘objectivism’ is “one of several doctrines holding that all reality is objective and external to the mind and that knowledge is reliably based on observed phenomena.”

The opposite of ‘objectivity’ is ‘subjectivity,’ and the opposite of ‘objectivism’ is ‘subjectivism.’ When a matter is subjective it is “of, produced by, or resulting from an individual’s mind or state of mind,” or it is “particular to a given individual” i.e. personal. This would then mean that subjectivism is “the doctrine that all knowledge is restricted to the conscious self and its sensory states.”

All throughout human history men have constantly made it their goal to “subject” others to their “objective” wills and views with the aim of achieving world peace, realizing---at times and at others not---that what they consider to be objective is actually subjective. As a consequence of differing with the king’s “objective” views the resistance would then be “subjugated” until they became his devoted “subjects.”

Not much has changed in this regard today. The only difference now is that people are no longer enslaved and controlled by physical force. Rather, kings and emperors have mastered the art of government by realizing that the best way to control and exploit is to feed the lusts and passions of the undisciplined majority through the media, sports, drugs, alcohol, and by providing the means necessary for citizens to live a comfort filled life.

Islamic history also knows much subjectivity. For instance, consider the early theological debate over the question of ‘Can the intellect determine good and evil without the aid of revelation?’ known in Arabic as ‘*al-tahsin wa al-taqbih al-‘aqliyyani.*’ One faction naturally answers the question in the affirmative, while the other upholds the belief that God is the only Lawgiver. Consequently, only He can determine what is good and what is evil, even though both factions accept that the intellect can determine the apparent benefits or harms in certain matters without the aid of revelation.

The truth of the matter is---in spite of the objections of some---that every human being brought into this world becomes the subject of someone else’s supposed objectivity. Every person is influenced by his or her surroundings. Every person’s belief or unbelief in God results from what he or she is taught, and the same can be said about a person’s morals and value system.

Western academia today struggles hard to sell the idea that ‘absolute’ objectivity can be achieved, and many are sold on this claim unfortunately. The reality is that all objectivity is relative and subjective. The relativity of objectivity finds its roots in the particular eyeglass through which the person is looking and examining a particular issue. Even to accept particular criteria as being the basis for passing an objective judgment about a matter is subjective in and of itself. Who says that your criteria for judging are better than mine?

Islam supports the idea of ‘relative objectivity,’ not ‘absolute objectivity.’ We see this in the famous statement attributed to Imam Muhammad ibn Idris Al-Shafi’i, “My opinion is correct with the possibility of being an error, while the opinion of another is an error with the possibility of being correct.” This ‘opinion’ he spoke of was a ‘religious’ opinion.

Many Muslims today are very critical of other Muslims who demand that all views related to the religion of Islam be subjected to a standardized criteria accepted by our early religious authorities. Their traditionalist opponents also insist that a common Muslim, who is unlearned in the Islamic sciences, be disqualified from having any considerable opinion about a religious matter when he or she does not possess the requisite qualifications for interpreting the sacred law. However, the modernists insist that there is no clergy in Islam. Therefore, every Muslim is qualified equally to read and have a viewpoint about Islam’s Holy Scriptures. As with early protestant Christians, they say that no one person’s view is superior to another’s, so we must accept their view that homosexuality is not an abomination in Islam, and that Islam does not have any set criteria for determining modest dress for a woman. Why should we accept this interpretation? Oh! Because, this is what their unqualified interpretation of the Qur’an led them to believe, and no one has the right to tell them that they are wrong.

With this logic, were we to consider the case with Usama bin Laden, his views on the subject of Jihad, and his interpretation of the Qur’anic verses concerning the subject, we would be led to say the same thing. What makes Bin Laden right? It is because he read them and this is what he understood. No one interpretation is correct, remember? So be objective, and do not condemn Usama bin Laden for his views, because no one view is correct.

In western universities and colleges, it is often demanded of the adherent to an “organized” religious denomination to “Imagine yourself as one who is not a Muslim, Christian, or Jew. Try not to look at this from a Qur’anic or Biblical perspective. Try to be objective.” We Muslims have every right then to ask, “And who told you that your perspective is objective, and that the criteria that you use to judge is not subjective?” The truth is simply that if I am not looking at or examining this matter from my particular world view, then I am examining it from your particular world view. But who is to say that your perspective is more objective than mine? This is the dilemma. Either I am looking at the matter from your perspective or from my own, while that perspective is just as subjective as mine.

What objective criteria do you use to determine natural human rights? What objective criteria are there for determining what countries should be barred from having nuclear weapons and which should be allowed? What objective criteria are there for determining what countries should be given humanitarian aid? What criteria are there for determining what countries should be liberated from their invaders? What objective criteria led you to

the conclusion that all countries should be democracies and that a democracy is the best form of government? The same question can be asked with regard to a score of other issues, like civil unions, abortion, homosexuality, age requirements for drinking alcohol, underage marriage, age parameters for statutory rape, verdicts of natural life imprisonment, and a score of other things.

In the end, Islam is the criterion for the Muslim in determining truth from falsehood, right from wrong. Muslims should not feel uneasy for developing and having different standards of morality than that of mainstream western culture. Lofty ideals, like the achievement of social equality, sounds admirable,¹ but the greater objective of Islam is to free humanity from the worship of God's subjects to the worship of the Creator of those subjects.²

“There has come to you from Allah a light and an illuminating Book. By it, Allah guides those who pursue His satisfaction to the paths that lead to peace, brings them out of darkneses into the light, and guides them to a path that is straight.” [5: 15-16]

¹ One of the stated western ideals is the realization of social, racial, ethnic, and gender equality. Islam's stated goal is to free the human being from the shackles of idolatry in all its forms and to realize the purity of one's worship of and faith in God. Too often today Muslims engage in western discourses and make western standards the basis for determining right from wrong, justice from injustice, good from evil, etc. This is so even though Islam has its own criteria for judging such things, and Muslims should not allow their admiration of western technological advancement to influence their views on morality and other things.

² This quote is attributed to a simple soldier in the army of Sa'd ibn Abu Waqqas during the Battle of al-Qadisiyya by the name of Rub'i ibn 'Amir. Rustam, the general of the opposing Persian army asked the Muslim army, "What has called you to wage war against us and to covet our homes?" Rub'I replied, "We have come to bring out---whoever wishes---from the worship of the slaves into the worship of Allah alone." [*Itmam al-Wafa fi Sirat al-Khulafa* of Muhammad al-Khadri: p.100]