Is objectivity all in the mind?

Objectivity is traditionally defined as the state or quality of being uninfluenced by personal feelings, interpretations, or bias; it presumes access to knowledge or truth that exists independently of the observer's mind ("objectivity.").

"We see things not as they are, but as we are." ("A Quote"). This often cited maxim, attributed to Anaïs Nin, gestures toward a profound question about knowledge concern: the extent to which human cognition mediates our access to reality. Central to this inquiry is the role of memory—not as an objective repository of facts, but as a reconstructive, interpretative faculty inherently shaped by emotion, bias, and neurological plasticity. Memory defines both our personal identities and our broader interpretative frameworks; it shapes not only how we recall the past, but how we perceive and evaluate the present. If our foundational cognitive processes are intrinsically subjective, then the very notion of objectivity—long upheld as the cornerstone of rational inquiry—demands reevaluation. This essay contends that objectivity, rather than existing as an autonomous, external standard, is profoundly shaped by the individual subjective architecture of the mind, which seems paradoxical, as objectivity and subjectivity are traditionally viewed as conceptual opposites. However, what is commonly taken to be objective knowledge is often a refined product of individual cognition, susceptible to distortion and variation across persons and contexts. In this sense, objectivity may not exist independently of the mind, but is instead constructed through subjective memory, perception, and interpretation. Furthermore, this essay will examine the complex relationship between personal identity

and the fallibility of memory to illustrate how what we often consider objective truths are, in fact, mediated and constructed by subjective mental processes.

To better understand the implications of memory's subjectivity and objectivity, it is necessary to clarify what constitutes personal identity. And in order to determine the relevance of the relationship between memory and personal identity, it is necessary to define what identity is. Derek Parfit defines that "Identity is a one-one relation. So any criterion of identity must appeal to a relation which is logically one-one. Psychological continuity is not logically one-one. So it cannot provide a criterion." In simple terms, this means that identity is a unique relationship where one thing is matched with exactly one other. Therefore, any way we determine and define identity must involve a relationship that is strictly one-to-one. However, Parfit goes on to state that psychological continuity (the idea that personal identity is based on the continuous flow of psychological traits like memories, personality, etc) does not fit this one-to-one relationship because psychological traits can be shared or duplicated, making it not strictly one-to-one. So, in this case, we cannot compare identity to traits involving psychological continuity. This fragmentation of psychological continuity suggests that the coherence of identity—often assumed to be objectively definable—is itself a mental construct, dependent on subjective processes like memory retention and interpretation.

Additionally, Mrinal Miri makes a similar comparison between traits involving memory and identity, stating, "For, a person can suffer a total loss of memory of all his past life (except perhaps his immediate past), without thereby ceasing either to be a person or to be identical with a person in the past." It would be unreasonable to refuse to recognize a person or to deny their continuity with their past self based solely on memory loss. The implication is clear: if personal identity persists even in the absence of memory, then the concept of a stable, objectively

definable self is undermined. What we perceive as continuity of identity may in fact be a product of internal narrative coherence rather than an externally verifiable truth.

To further illustrate this point, we can consider the perspective of the individual who has suffered memory loss, such as with amnesia. From a neurological perspective, the development of amnesia can be attributed to causes such as damage to brain structure from either injury or disease. Still, there are many other reasons for how an individual might develop it ("Amnesia" *Mayo*). Traditional thinkers such as the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud believed the cause of amnesia to be one of three part causation factors in the psyche: "(1) a constitutional factor involving memory-capacity and strength of instinct ; (2) conflict in infancy or early childhood, followed by repression ; (3) a current stimulus" ("Amnesia" *The British*). However, his theory has been debunked, and the more prevalent common belief among neurologists is the one formerly stated. But from a psychological standpoint, what is the connection between an individual's amnesia and the sharing of memories? Interpersonality priming tests an amnesiac individual's responsiveness to stimuli across differing personalities and identities (Eich et. al). In the case where one individual exhibited two personalities, Alice and Bonnie, a tested experiment was done where " having Alice study the word "lullaby" made it easier for Bonnie to arrive at the only possible solution to the fragment l_l_a_y". This example indicates that memory transfer can occur between different identities without conscious awareness. And therefore, that memory alone cannot define personal identity since information can be implicitly shared and utilized across different identities. These findings illustrate that memory can operate beneath conscious awareness, dissociated from the unified self. If unconscious memory influences thought across identities, the line between subjective experience and objective mental states becomes blurred, casting doubt on the mind's ability to access truth independently of its internal distortions.

In what other ways can research see the continuity of identity persist even with the loss of all memories? Clive Wearing, a prominent English musician, suffered from a devastating brain infection, which rendered him unable to form any new memories (Suddendorf et al.). While he forgot about topics he had just spoken about and was continually under the impression that he had woken up, he could still play the piano and conduct a choir, skills he had before losing his memory. Although he cannot form new memories and forget events within seconds, he still remembers how to play music and conduct. This case suggests that certain implicit faculties of the mind remain insulated from autobiographical memory loss. It also implies that what we often regard as "objective" traits—such as musical ability or professional identity—are deeply embedded in personal mental architecture, not publicly verifiable facts. Thus, objectivity becomes entangled with the persistence of internalized routines and dispositions.

Another compelling example comes from observations with individuals living with Alzheimer's disease. Despite growing memory loss, most Alzheimer's patients retain core personality traits, emotional responses, and social patterns that were present far before the disease set in ("2024"). Research indicates that while Alzheimer's disease leads to progressive memory loss, certain aspects of personal identity, such as emotional responses and social behaviors, are not impaired. A study, highlighted by the Mayo Clinic, found that despite Alzheimer's patients' significant memory loss, their basic personality traits remain intact, suggesting that personal identity is greater than just memory (Mayo Clinic Staff). This raises profound questions about the nature of an "objective" self. If enduring personality and emotional continuity persist independently of factual memory, then self-knowledge – and by extension, what we consider objective identity –may be more rooted in subjective affective states than in

coherent, empirical narratives. Such findings challenge the assumption that objective selfhood exists apart from the interpretive and emotional frameworks constructed within the mind.

Additional research within neuropsychology also indicates that although the hippocampus—the region of the brain most associated with developing and remembering memories—is severely affected in Alzheimer's, the areas responsible for emotion processing and well-established routines are comparatively preserved (Eich et al.). Similarly, Psychology Today asserts that even in advanced Alzheimer's, patients can still retain core parts of their personality. This indicates that identity is maintained through long-term emotional patterns and social interaction, even while memory fades (De Waal). This evidence speaks in favor of the idea that personal identity doesn't rely completely on memory but is multi-faceted, based upon long-term patterns of emotion, personality, and social interaction persisting even where memory does not.Consequently, the assumption that objectivity exists outside the subjective mind falters—if the self is preserved not through factual memory but through emotional and relational continuity, then even self-knowledge is constructed internally, filtered through emotion-laden and cognitively limited frameworks.

Some might argue that memory is the central, if not sole, detriment of personal identity, because it provides continuity and a feeling of self throughout time. Philosopher John Locke famously opined that identity is fundamentally a matter of memory since it allows individuals to recognize themselves as the same person across different moments in life (Locke). Without memory, such reasoning goes, a person loses the ability to connect his past, present, and future, effectively losing his identity. For instance, individuals with severe amnesia who forget past experiences, like the people they were close to, and even their own names often have a fractured sense of self, which again supports their argument that memory is essential to identity. However,

Locke’s reliance on memory presupposes its reliability—an assumption that modern findings problematize, thereby questioning the possibility of objective self-knowledge." In addition, the supporters of this argument propose that identity is mainly constructed through individual narratives, and without memory to guide these narratives, individuals lose the ability to define themselves in meaningful ways. Incidents of dissociative amnesia, for instance. Show that individuals who lose large segments of their past usually often feel disconnected from who they once were, sometimes even assuming entirely new identities (Kopleman and Kapur). Nevertheless, although it is certain that memory contributes significantly to the experience of self, this argument neglects the truth that human beings still display consistent personality traits, feelings, and behavior even when memory is lacking. Thus, while memory is involved in a person's idea of who they are, it is not the sole decisive factor in personal identity. This refutation highlights the central dilemma of objectivity: if the supposed foundation for self-continuity (i.e., memory) is fluid and unreliable, then our perception of the self—and by extension, our perception of reality—is inevitably shaped by internal biases and cognitive constructions.

Therefore, the notion of objectivity as an impartial, external truth is undermined by the intrinsically subjective nature of memory and identity, indicating that what we perceive as objective knowledge is fundamentally contingent upon the interpretative frameworks of the mind.

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