

## Notes on *From Brain to Cosmos*:

### Questions and Answers about Subjective Fact

by Mark F. Sharlow

In my book *From Brain to Cosmos*, I made extensive use of the concepts of a subjective fact and of a subjective fact statement. Here I will try to answer some questions and objections regarding these concepts. These questions did not come from readers of the book, but are questions that I anticipate some readers might have.

**Question 1.** Are subjective facts theory-laden?

**Question 2.** If subjective facts were theory-laden, would this undermine the project of *From Brain to Cosmos*?

**Question 3.** Is the language of subjective fact an independent observation language?

#### **Brief Answers to Questions 1-3:**

1. Yes, in a certain sense.
2. No.
3. No.

#### **Longer Answers to Questions 1-3:**

Philosophers of science have long recognized that observation statements can be "theory-laden," or dependent in a certain way upon theoretical presuppositions. Often it is argued that there cannot be an "independent observation language" -- that is, a language for the description of observations independently of any prior theoretical framework. (On these two points, see for example [Hesse].) Persons familiar with these issues might suspect that the subjective fact language in *From Brain to Cosmos* is intended to be an independent observation language of some kind. If this were the case, then the line of argument in *From Brain to Cosmos* might be seriously weakened.

Fortunately, this is not the case. The subjective fact language is not intended to be an

independent observation language -- and the project of *From Brain to Cosmos* does not depend upon its being one. Of course, if one believes in the possibility of an independent observation language, one might be tempted to think that there is some overlap between the classes of subjective fact statements and of independent observation statements. But one does not have to think this, or even to believe in an independent observation language, to recognize that the subjective fact language can be formulated and used for the purposes described in *From Brain to Cosmos*.

Subjective facts are, at bottom, facts about how things seem -- although subjective facts differ in certain respects from conventional facts about how things seem. (See *From Brain to Cosmos*, Chs. 2 & 3.) In *From Brain to Cosmos*, I tried to deduce, or at least render plausible, certain conclusions through the use of subjective facts. For that project, it does not matter *how* the subjective facts got to be true; it only matters *that* they are true. Even if subjective facts are true only by virtue of theory-laden judgments (or theory-influenced perceptions), one still can use such facts as the basis of arguments, as I do in the book.

Note that subjective facts, unlike many "theory-laden" statements, are not subject to abandonment in the face of empirical evidence. This is the case, not because of anything mysterious about subjective facts, but simply because subjective facts are concerned with how things seem and not with how things really are. (The answer to Question 4 below may help with this point.) However, the *subjective content* of a subjective fact certainly can be theory-laden in a sense. For example, a trained weather observer might look out into the sky and immediately notice a rain cloud. The principal subjective fact involved here is one in which it seems in a particular instance that there is a rain cloud. An observer with no knowledge about weather might not see the rain cloud as a rain cloud, but simply as a dark area in the sky. In this case, the subjective fact is one in which it seems in a particular instance that there is a dark area in the sky. This difference in subjective facts reflects a kind of theory-ladenness, though not the strongest possible kind.

In brief, the subjective fact language is not intended to be an independent observation language, and may well be theory-laden in some respects -- but none of this has any bearing on the uses of subjective fact presented in *From Brain to Cosmos*.

**Question 4.** Isn't the very idea of a subjective fact, or the related idea of how things seem, itself theory-laden? Doesn't this possibility cast doubt upon the project of *From Brain to Cosmos*?

**Answer:** We cannot summarily rule out the possibility that these ideas are theory-laden. But even if they were, subjective fact statements still could be true, and the arguments in *From Brain to Cosmos* still would work.

One might think that if the notion of subjective fact (or of how things seem) turned out to be theory-laden, then the project of *From Brain to Cosmos* would be undermined, because

that project would be tied to a particular, and perhaps revisable, theoretical standpoint. The only theoretical revision that plausibly could threaten the notion of subjective fact would be a revision that causes the phrase "It seems that...", or its equivalents, to be abandoned. Presumably this would be a revision in our beliefs about mental phenomena. But even if these beliefs were radically revised (and I will not argue that this should happen), there would be no need to abandon the view that it can *seem* that something is the case. The following argument shows one reason why.

Suppose, for the sake of *reductio ad absurdum*, that we adopted some theory that forced us to deny truth to statements of the form "It seems that P." Then we could simply introduce a new word, say "seems-1," and use it in all the situations where we previously would have used "seems." We could take the statement "It seems-1 that P" to be true if and only if one of *those* situations obtained. Then we could decide to redefine the word "seems" to be an abbreviation of "seems-1." In this manner, we could keep using statements of the form "It seems that P" in the customary way, even without the mind-related beliefs that we now automatically associate with such statements. We could do this even if we originally learned how to use and understand "seem" with the help of the old beliefs about the mind, and even if the circumstances under which the statements are true are picked out with the help of the outmoded beliefs. (We could just consider the old belief system as a device for picking out situations -- in much the same way that a game leads to the picking out of a winner.) Thus, the adoption of the new theory could not interfere with our use of statements of the form "It seems that P." The same argument is applicable to subjective fact statements, which are not quite statements of the form "It seems that P."

**Question 5.** Is *From Brain to Cosmos* an attempt to found all knowledge upon subjective fact?

**Answer:** No! The project of *From Brain to Cosmos* is something much more modest: an attempt to find out how much metaphysical knowledge can be built upon a specific domain of facts (facts about how things seem). The most that the book accomplishes by way of foundations is the founding of a limited range of metaphysical knowledge -- but even limited results of this sort can be interesting. (And even these limited foundations are not unanalyzable. Those who have read the entire book will know what I mean by this last remark.)

**Question 6.** Could the language of subjective fact be a private language?

**Answer:** There is no particular reason to think that the language of subjective fact could be a private language. However, for the purposes of the book, it doesn't really matter if it could. *From Brain to Cosmos* contains arguments in which subjective fact statements, or generalizations built upon such statements, play important roles. If it turns out that one can't learn to use these statements without being part of a linguistic community, this has

no bearing on the truth of the subjective fact statements -- and the arguments still will go through. What matters to the book is not *how* subjective fact statements come to be used, but *that* they can be used.

Wittgenstein famously argued against the possibility of a private language [Wittgenstein, pars. 256-271]. One's stand on this question does not bear on the project of *From Brain to Cosmos*.

**Question 7.** Does the concept of subjective fact depend upon folk psychology?

**Answer:** This question presupposes that there is such a thing as "folk psychology" as some philosophers of mind understand that term. Here I will not address the large issues surrounding folk psychology, and will not try to summarize the debate about this concept, but will focus on the question at hand.

The answer to this question is implicit in the answer to Question 4. Even if our beliefs about the mind were infested with folk psychology and needed to be abandoned or radically revised, there still would be no reason to stop talking about how things seem -- and we still could regard subjective fact statements as true or false. (Perhaps the "situations" mentioned in my answer to Question 4 could be neurophysiological or behavioral situations.) As long as some subjective fact statements can be regarded as true, we can use these statements as premises and can argue about them, as I did in *From Brain to Cosmos*. What matters isn't *how* subjective fact statements come to be true, but *that* they come to be true.

For the record, I am not endorsing the view that folk psychology, as usually understood, really exists -- or that it deserves all the attention it has gotten in the literature. I am only pointing out that the idea of folk psychology cannot be used to mount a successful critique of the notion of subjective fact.

## References

[Hesse] Mary Hesse, "Is There an Independent Observation Language?" In *The Nature and Function of Scientific Theories*, ed. Robert G. Colodny (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1970).

[Wittgenstein] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen / Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958).