Relative and Absolute Evidence

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Conscious experience allows us to observe the world around us, as well as formulate opinions and arguments about this world. Conscious experience also allows us to formulate opinions solely with the mind a priori, or, "from the armchair." When formulating these opinions, regardless of how abstract or theoretical they may be, one must use extreme caution when considering the pieces of evidence that seem to back up one's claim, and whether these pieces of evidence are valid. When proper evidential criteria is not held, or is weakened, one's entire belief or argument, must be called into question. In this paper I will propose two categories of evidence, relative and absolute, and that a piece of evidence must fall in one or both of these categories to be considered valid, and to thus formulate valid beliefs and arguments. I will show that this is the case by first explaining the criteria for absolute and relative evidence, then proving that one of these categories must be filled for a belief or argument to be considered valid, and finally, addressing several objections to this theory.

Absolute evidence is perhaps the easier of the two forms of evidence I am proposing to grasp. Simply put, absolute evidence is any piece of information that's substance does not change or is not debatable because of the subjective view of the human mind. In other terms, absolute evidence remains constant when the human mind and consciousness is taken out of the picture. This type of evidence can be thought of as consisting of what John Locke called "primary qualities." Locke considered primary qualities as being, "[...] properties which the object possesses independent of us." (SEP, *John Locke*). For example, such properties that qualify as primary qualities, as well as absolute evidence, are volume and the occupying of space, motion[1], and shape.

[1] Whether an object is in motion or not, but not speed or velocity, as these are relative to the state of the observer.

Some specific examples of absolute evidence include the earth's moving[2], the number of moles of sodium chloride in a tablespoon of salt, the mass of a specific philosophy textbook, etc. After relative evidence is introduced, it becomes clear that absolute evidence in nearly every case is the less controversial of the two types of evidence. This is because after an initial period of discovery and uncertainty, science is hardly ever open to interpretation. Of course, when areas of scientific interest have yet to be settled, there is the possibility of debate. For example, whether or not there is water on mars. There may or may not be a substance that is H_2O on the planet known as mars, and it is to be noted that regardless of the truth behind this, there is an underlying absolute fact. That is, whether or not there is water on mars.

Relative evidence, on the other hand, are the beliefs that rely on the subjective view and consciousness of the person who holds the belief. I assert that relative evidence includes, but is not limited to what Locke calls "secondary qualities." These are, "[...] powers in bodies to produce ideas in us like color, taste, smell, etc." (SEP, *John Lock*). These secondary qualities, as Locke asserted, emerged from our sensory perceptions with the primary qualities[3] of objects. I take relative evidence to have a scope a bit broader than just secondary qualities. Relative evidence is to include the subjective experience of what is like to be a certain someone or something.

The latter part of this criteria for relative evidence is best explained by Thomas Nagel in *What is it like to be a bat?* In his paper, Nagel explains that, "[...] the fact that an organism has conscious experience *at all* means, basically, that there is something it is like to *be* that organism," (Nagel, *What is it like to be a bat?*). It then follows that the experiences, that is, what it is like to be a bat, or any organism that has conscious experience, can be used as relative evidence, *if such evidence is widely accepted[4] from organisms of the same type*. In other words, experiences that are only supported by a single individual[5] cannot be used as valid evidence (see footnote 4). Should such an experience be widely supported and agreed upon, it can thus be used as valid relative evidence.

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[2] Once again, that the earth is moving, not specifying a speed or velocity.
[3] The primary qualities that Locke ascribed to objects.
[4] Or would be widely accepted if others were in that place, time, or scenario.
[5] Taking humans as the organism of interest, in this case.

The first clarification to make here is in regard to which organisms have conscious mental states and experiences in the first place, as it is only those organisms that can possibly hold or contribute any pieces of relative evidence. I accept Nagel's criteria for this, which is that, "[...] an organism has conscious mental states if and only if there is something that it is to *be* that organism - something it is like *for* the organism." (Nagel, *Bat*).

The next clarification to make with relative evidence is as to which *types* of organisms are able to "authenticate" relative evidence. This can be partially answered using the explanation of the term "type" in Philosophy of Mind and Cognition, by David Braddon-Mitchell and Frank Cameron Jackson. In PMC, a type is considered to be, "[...] kinds, properties, or classes of similar things." (JBM, PMC). This is contrast to a token, which is a specific that falls under a type class[6]. Thus, only humans can truly understand the perspective, point of view, and experiences of other humans. Conversely, humans cannot truly understand the perspective and experiences of a bat (to be discussed).

Now that both absolute and relative evidence have been introduced as concepts, it is necessary to discuss how these classes can be used to determine the validity of beliefs and arguments. I assert that for a belief or argument[7] to be considered valid, the evidence used in support of the belief or argument must fit the criteria for absolute evidence or relative evidence. Furthermore, that any component that does not meet the criteria for either of these classes should not be used in formulating beliefs nor arguments, as it would render them invalid.

On the surface, this requirement for the validity of beliefs and arguments may seem overly intuitive. After all, at first thought many beliefs one holds may seem to clearly fit the criteria for either relative or absolute evidence. However, there are copious instances in which beliefs don't fit the criteria for relative or absolute evidence, and are used as such anyways, and many instances in which it seems uncertain as to whether a belief meets the criteria. It is the latter that seems to face the most controversy and objections, to which I will respond.

The first point that needs to be addressed, which is not so much of an objection as it is a pitfall, is that of vagueness. More specifically, at what point does a belief become absolute evidence? Is it enough for one scientist to publish a paper on the discovery of H_2O on mars for

[6] The table in WAG 201 is a token of the types brown, table, objects with four legs, etc.
[7] Or any type of formulated opinion.

that to be universally accepted as absolute evidence? How about two scientists? Fifty? One thousand? It seems that certainly one instance of the discovery is not enough, but as the classic question of when a pile becomes a heap as one grain of sand is added at a time, how many corroborations of an absolute fact allows it to be used as absolute evidence? This can be answered by asking oneself, "is there a preponderance of evidence in support of belief X?"[8] If the answer to this is yes, then the belief should be considered absolute evidence. While one's answer to this question is open to interpretation, it nevertheless provides a framework for the problem of vagueness as it pertains to absolute evidence.

We run across this same problem of vagueness with relative evidence as well, except it seems that it is a bit more troublesome in this case. As previously defined, experiences and perceptions from certain organisms are to be deemed relative evidence if such evidence is *widely accepted* from organisms of the same type. As in the vagueness problem for absolute evidence, we come to the question of how many organisms must accepted a certain perception or subjective experience in order for it to be considered "widely accepted?" The reason this appears to be the more damaging of the vagueness problems is that relative evidence, for the most part, cannot be proven or substantiated through scientific discovery. Thus, the primary way of one knowing that their experiences and perceptions are shared is through word of mouth or assumption, rather than a set of experiments. Unfortunately, this forces the "widely accepted" criteria to remain open to interpretation. As with absolute evidence, this does provide some framework for something to be deemed relative evidence, but could be improved upon.

Perhaps the biggest objection to the theory of relative evidence is that one does not need to be of the same type of organism to understand what it is like to be that organism, mainly, understand its experiences. Thomas Nagel offers the simple rebuke to this objection, explaining that one cannot understand what it is like to be a bat[9], because when they attempt to do so, they are actually imagining what it would be like for *them* to be bat. This is an extremely subtle yet important distinction. Nagel goes on to explain that it is impossible to understand what it is like for a bat to be a bat because our minds lack certain features that bats possess, as well as have excess features that a bat doesn't have. Furthermore, one cannot add and subject such features

[8] Coincidentally, "a preponderance of evidence" is the standard for conviction in a civil lawsuit.
[9] Using a bat as an example, but the logic holds for other organisms that have conscious experience.

from their mind, because to do so would simply be for *them* to look at the world with those features, not an organism of another type. An example of this form of misunderstanding would be for one to imagine having sonar. Obviously humans do not have this capability, and even with the deepest scientific knowledge of sonar, a human would not know what it is like to have sonar [10], nevertheless be a bat with sonar.

At its core, the rebuke to this objection is that all experiences have a strong subjective component. That is, that experiences are based on the being experiencing them. Our interaction with the world is largely (if not completely) based on relationships. For example, how heavy an object *feels* depends on how much muscle one has. On a more general level, a photon does not become light[11] until it hits an eyeball. In an interview, Dr. Austin Gleeson, Professor of physics at the University of Texas at Austin, explained that sound is merely a set of changes in the pressure and density of air[12], and that while it is "noise" to us upon hitting the eardrum, it is merely echolocation for a bat. As Nagel explains, this is not confined to extreme cases as a human vs. bat. Rather, even the "[...] experience of a person deaf and blind from birth is not accessible to me, [...] nor presumably is mine to him." (Nagel, *Bat*). Thus, we come to conclude the original point in rebuttal of this objection, that experiences can only be understood by similar creatures.

The next objections that need to be addressed are in regard to the possibility of a brain in a vat (BIV) scenario and the lack of continuity[13]. The brain in a vat theory holds that it is possible that humans do not exist in the world that we see and understand, but rather that our brains are actually in a vat in another world, in which other beings have hooked up our brains to electrodes and computers, and are simply giving us the appearance of having our own bodies and existing in this world that we see and interact with. Furthermore, many BIV theorists hold that it is impossible for anyone to know if they are indeed a BIV, and that if somehow they were to spontaneously become a BIV, no difference could be detected. The threat this poses to holding evidence is that if we are BIVs, none of our perceptions nor beliefs can be trusted, regardless of

[10] Just as "Mary" would not know what it is like to see color even if she knew all the physical traits of it.
[11] Light as we observe it- "something" that allows things to be seen.
[12] Hence why sound does not exist in a vacuum.
[13] Continuity as George Berkeley described it.

how many others share the same beliefs. If the world we perceive is actually a "virtual reality," the laws of physics and our subjective experiences would not be valid sources of evidence.

I will address the problem posed by the brain in a vat scenario not by arguing against the possibility of BIVs, but rather accepting the *possibility* of BIVs and approaching the problem from a different angle. At its core, even with accepting the possibility that I am a BIV, and the world around me is "fake," there is no evidence that the world we perceive cannot be trusted. In other terms, a lack of evidence that I am a BIV does not mean that I am a BIV, but does allow for the possibility that I am a BIV. The danger that this response addresses is that a lack of evidence for some feature X, does not disprove X. Rather, evidence *against* X disproves it. Nagel seems to agree with this point in *What is it like to be a bat?*, saying, "[a]nd to deny the reality or logical significance of what we can never describe or understand is the crudest form of cognitive dissonance." (Nagel, *Bat*).

I am taking Nagel's claim one step further by saying that denying the possibility of feature X because we have no evidence for nor against it is a gross misunderstanding. Thus, when considering the options of discrediting all evidence due to the possibility of being a BIV, of which you have no evidence for nor against, or accepting evidence you obtain through experiences, sensory perceptions, and scientific inquiry of the world you interact with, it seems quite obvious that the latter is the far more rational option. I've given this argument against the BIV objection, in the form of reductio ad absurdum, below for clarity:

1. If I am a brain in a vat, I could not know that I am a brain in a vat[14].
2. I have no evidence that I am a brain in a vat.
3. I have no evidence that I am not a brain in a vat
4. I interact with a world around me through experiences, sensory perceptions, and scientific inquiry.

C. No evidence obtained through experience, sensory perception, nor scientific inquiry can be considered valid.

[14] This has been debated by philosophers such as G.E. Moore and others.

This argument clearly winds up at an invalid conclusion. Thus, it helps bolster the counterpoint to the brain in a vat objection to relative and absolute evidence.

I briefly mentioned the next objection having to do with continuity. While continuity has several meanings in philosophy, when I use the term I am referring to the theory that objects continue to exist when nobody is there to observe them. That is, that objects exist outside of the mind. Famously, early modern philosopher George Berkeley wrote extensively on the topic of continuity[15]. The popular 20th century limerick by Ronald Knox explains the idea of continuity quite well:

<u>God in the Quad</u>
There was a young man who said 'God,
I find it exceedingly odd,
that a tree, as a tree,
ceases to be when there's no one around in the quad.'

God's response:
'Young man I find your astonishment odd.
I am always around in the quad.
So a tree, as a tree,
never ceases to be, as it's observed by yours faithfully, God.'

Now obviously this poem puts a bit of stress on the presence of God having to do with continuity, however, that is not why I've included it. The limerick, in a somewhat fun way, explains that without any sort of continuity, a "tree in the quad" would not exist when the young man nor anyone else is around to observe it. This prospect of the universe *not* having any sort of continuity seems to pose quite a damaging problem to what could be considered and used as evidence. After all, if the tree ceased to exist some of the time[16], how can one be sure that when

[15] Berkeley used continuity as a proof for God, however that is outside the scope of this paper. I have referenced him solely for the idea of continuity by itself.
[16] When nobody is around to observe it.

the tree "reappears", that it is really the same tree? The tree may look the same, and even have the same chemical composition if it were to be tested, however, couldn't it still be a different tree? It would seem that this is certainly a possibility.

The problem this situation poses is that if the tree is a different tree every time one returned to the quad without them knowing, how can any evidence, relative or absolute, be trusted? Evidence and beliefs formed on Tuesday in the quad are likely to be completely invalid on Wednesday in the quad. I will address this objection via reductio ad absurdum as well.

First, I will once again accept the possibility of continuity *not* being the case. Now, assessing what is known, when I am in the quad I see and interact with the (a) tree, but when I am not in the quad, of course I do not see nor interact with the tree. This means that when we are in the quad we have evidence that the tree is in the quad as well, mainly being that we see the tree. We have no evidence, however, that the tree is not in the quad when we are not. Simply not seeing (interacting) the tree when one is not in the quad is obviously not evidence that supports the non-existence of that tree. Of course, this also means that we have no true evidence that the tree *is* in the quad when we are not. To follow these premises with a conclusion that the tree ceases to be when there's nobody around in the quad is, once again, as Nagel says, "[...] the crudest form of cognitive dissonance." (Nagel, *Bat*). Hence, even accepting the possibility of the lack of continuity, it does not follow that relative or absolute evidence should be deemed invalid. This argument of reductio ad absurdum can be concisely seen below:

1. When I am in the quad, I see and interact with the tree.
2. When I am not in the quad, I do not see nor interact with the tree.

C_1. When I am not in the quad, I have no concrete evidence for the tree currently existing.

C. The tree ceases to be when I am not in the quad.

This conclusion clearly does not follow the premises nor the sub-conclusion. I can take this one step further by adding a third premise that claims that I do indeed know that the tree doesn't exist when I am not in the quad, making the argument look like so:

1. When I am in the quad, I see and interact with the tree.
2. When I am not in the quad, I do not see nor interact with the tree.

C_1. When I am not in the quad, I have no concrete evidence for the tree currently existing.

3. When I am not in the quad, I know that the tree does not exist[17].

C. The tree ceases to be when I am not in the quad.

This argument fails because rather than the conclusion not following the premises, premise 3 does not follow premise 1, 2, or the sub-conclusion. This is the case because for premised 3 to be true, that is, know that the tree does not exist when you are not in the quad, you must interact with the tree (or quad, since the tree "isn't there") in some way. In other terms, to know that the tree does not exist when you are not in the quad, you must interact with the quad when you are not in the quad. This is impossible barring a form of telepathy unbeknownst to me. Through this methodology, it can be firmly understood that one may accept the possibility of there not being continuity, but cannot know that there is no continuity.

Finally, the last step is the same as that of the BIV objection. On the one hand, one can deem all absolute and relative evidence invalid due to the possibility of no continuity, or one can accept the relative and absolute evidence that they have gathered through experiences, sensory perceptions, and scientific inquiry. Once again, the latter is clearly the more reasonable of these propositions.

Overall, the difference between the two types of evidence, absolute and relative, lies in the line between the universe as it exists without organisms with conscious experience, and those experiences and subjective interpretations of the universe, respectively. Given these two types of evidence, it has been shown that arguments and beliefs can only be valid if supported with valid

[17] At that moment.

evidence of either of these categories. Finally, prima facie, the objections using a brain in a vat and the lack of continuity seem to be the most serious. On a deeper look, however, these objections, as well as several others, hold very little weight. The practical application of these three points is simple, but not necessarily easy: when formulating beliefs and arguments, always comb through what you are using as evidence and confirm its legitimacy of being either relative or absolute evidence.

Resources

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