

Is Subjectivity Overly Celebrated in the Arts but Unfairly Condemned in History?

Areas of Knowledge: The Arts and History

Introduction

Subjectivity shapes how people perceive, interpret, and create knowledge. In the arts, personal experience and emotion are often praised as essential to creative expression, while in history, similar subjectivity is viewed as a weakness that threatens objectivity and accuracy. This contrast raises the knowledge question:

Is subjectivity inherently valuable in some forms of knowing and harmful in others?

This essay argues that subjectivity plays a necessary role in both the arts and history, but its value depends on purpose. In the arts, subjectivity drives originality and emotional connection. In history, it must be managed rather than removed, as interpretation is unavoidable when constructing accounts of the past. By exploring both areas, it becomes clear that subjectivity is not inherently celebrated or condemned; it is judged by how it serves the aims of each discipline.

The Arts: Subjectivity as the Foundation of Expression

The arts thrive on subjectivity because art aims to evoke emotion, communicate personal perspective, and challenge collective assumptions. Knowledge in this area is often experiential, involving interpretation rather than verification. Artistic value depends on meaning, not factual accuracy, so the artist's unique vision becomes a source of insight rather than distortion.

For example, Vincent van Gogh's *Starry Night* is not a literal depiction of a night sky but a reflection of his inner world. Its impact lies in transforming personal emotion into a form of shared understanding that communicates an insight about human experience. The subjectivity of color, movement, and texture allows the viewer to connect with the artist's perception of reality. The knowledge produced here is emotional and reflective, illustrating that personal perspective deepens rather than weakens understanding.

Similarly, in literature, subjectivity allows writers to reveal truths that factual description cannot capture.

In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Gabriel García Márquez uses magical realism to portray Latin American history and identity through imagination rather than documentation. Readers gain an emotional grasp of cultural memory that complements historical accounts. The subjective narrative creates a bridge between individual and collective experience.

The arts therefore celebrate subjectivity because it broadens what counts as knowledge. It validates emotion, intuition, and imagination as legitimate ways of knowing. Objectivity, while still useful for technical skill or critique, cannot replace the human dimension that gives art meaning. The celebration of subjectivity in the arts is not excessive but essential, as it allows for multiple interpretations that expand rather than restrict understanding.

History: The Challenge of Objectivity

In contrast, history aims to reconstruct the past as accurately as possible. Objectivity ensures credibility, and subjectivity is often treated as bias that distorts the record. The historian's task is to evaluate sources, cross-check evidence, and form conclusions supported by fact. Yet complete objectivity is impossible, as the historian's choice of topic, sources, and interpretation is influenced by cultural and personal perspective.

For instance, historical accounts of colonialism differ sharply depending on the historian's context.

European records often portrayed empire as a civilizing mission, while postcolonial historians reframed it as exploitation and resistance. Both views rely on evidence but interpret it through distinct value systems. This suggests that history, while seeking objectivity, cannot escape subjectivity; it can only regulate it.

The debate over subjectivity in history also appears in discussions about narrative. The historian must tell a story, but storytelling inherently involves selection and emphasis. For example, when studying the French Revolution, a historian might highlight political ideology, economic crisis, or social class depending on their analytical lens. Each interpretation shapes how the past is understood. While this subjectivity can be criticized as bias, it also reveals the historian's reasoning process. Knowledge in history emerges through dialogue among interpretations rather than through a single definitive account.

Subjectivity becomes problematic when it replaces evidence with opinion. For example, historical revisionism motivated by ideology, such as denying the Holocaust, shows how unregulated subjectivity undermines truth. This danger explains why history condemns subjectivity more harshly than the arts: the discipline's credibility depends on evidence-based reasoning. Still, a balanced approach recognizes that personal perspective is unavoidable and can even enrich historical understanding when made explicit.

The Relationship Between the Two Areas of Knowledge

While the arts and history approach subjectivity differently, their methods intersect more than they appear to. Both depend on interpretation, though for different ends. In the arts, interpretation creates new meaning; in history, it organizes evidence into coherent narratives. The difference lies in how each discipline evaluates validity. Art values authenticity and emotional truth, while history values coherence and factual reliability.

Yet both areas use imagination to bridge gaps in knowledge. A historian reconstructing ancient societies without written records must imagine possible contexts from limited artifacts, just as an artist imagines possibilities beyond direct observation. Subjectivity here becomes a tool for insight. What matters is the standard of justification applied afterward. The artist justifies through emotional or aesthetic impact; the historian justifies through logical reasoning and corroboration.

Both disciplines also shape collective identity. Art reflects cultural experience through subjective expression, and history shapes memory by interpreting the past. Each, therefore, influences how societies understand themselves. Excessive condemnation of subjectivity in history risks producing sterile accounts detached from human experience, while unchecked celebration of subjectivity in the arts risks turning creativity into self-indulgence. The strength of each area lies in finding equilibrium between personal insight and shared understanding.

Counterclaim: When Subjectivity Distorts Knowledge

While subjectivity enables insight, it can also mislead. In the arts, extreme subjectivity can detach works from cultural or communicative relevance. Art that focuses solely on personal expression may lose the capacity to engage others. For example, abstract performance art that rejects context or audience interpretation may provoke attention but fail to produce lasting meaning. The balance between individuality and universality defines artistic success.

In history, unacknowledged subjectivity can produce distortion. Selective use of evidence can turn history into propaganda. Nationalist histories often elevate one perspective while erasing others, shaping collective memory through omission. When subjectivity becomes a political tool, it undermines the discipline's aim to inform and to preserve truth. These risks demonstrate that while both areas depend on perspective, they also require internal checks to maintain credibility.

Evaluation of the Knowledge Question

The question of whether subjectivity is celebrated or condemned depends on each field's relationship to truth. In the arts, truth is plural and experiential, allowing subjectivity to function as a strength. In history, truth aspires to objectivity, so subjectivity appears as interference. Both forms of knowledge are shaped through interpretation, even though their standards for establishing truth differ significantly. Artists interpret emotion; historians interpret evidence. The processes differ in degree, not in kind.

Subjectivity, when acknowledged and critically examined, becomes a source of transparency. A historian who admits perspective allows readers to judge interpretation more fairly, just as an artist who situates their work in context deepens understanding. The problem arises not from subjectivity itself but from its denial. The illusion of total objectivity in history can be as misleading as the illusion of complete freedom in art. Both require reflection and accountability.

Conclusion

Subjectivity is neither a virtue nor a flaw by nature. In the arts, it is celebrated because it reflects the essence of human creativity and emotional connection. In history, it is managed carefully to protect factual integrity while recognizing that interpretation is unavoidable. The difference lies in purpose: art seeks expression, while history seeks explanation.

To condemn subjectivity in history completely is to ignore the historian's role as interpreter. Unconditional celebration of subjectivity in the arts may risk detaching creation from shared meaning. True understanding arises from balance. Subjectivity, when examined with discipline and honesty, strengthens knowledge rather than weakens it. Both areas reveal that knowing is a human act, and every human act carries perspective. The challenge is not to remove subjectivity but to recognize how it shapes truth in different ways.