

EXPLORING SUBJECTIVITY, AS SEEN  
IN THE CURIOUS INCIDENT OF THE  
DOG IN THE NIGHT-TIME

# INTRODUCTION

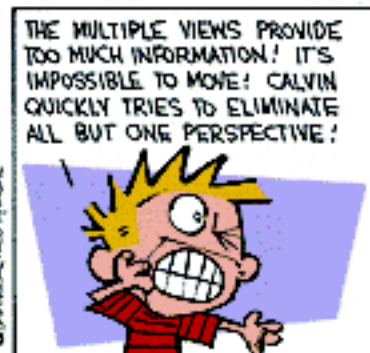
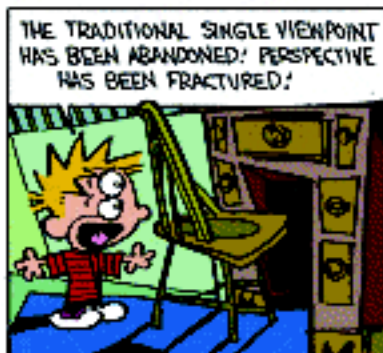
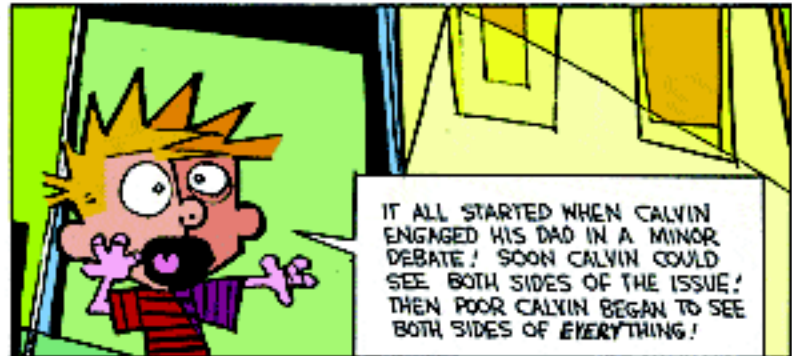
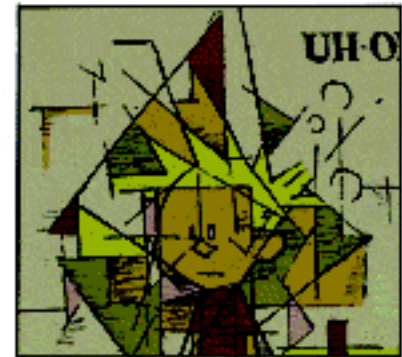
Mark Haddon's novel, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, profiles the life of a young man who cannot understand emotion. For most humans, subjective emotional knowledge guides actions and especially perceptions of others. Christopher, a character without this perspective, sees intense emotional moments, but cannot understand them in an emotional context.

To see how Christopher's character judges the emotional acts of others while lacking an emotional perspective helps us to understand some of our own emotional fallacies in the context of understanding others.

Also, note that throughout I discuss Chris as a literary character, as he is, and so I am probably not fair to him in the context of any particular conditions which are portrayed as affecting him. But such is my analysis.

# calvin and hobbes

by WILSON







# FOOD COLOURING

This photograph explores the logical processes behind emotional understanding. While Christopher maintains and constantly states that he is logical, he inexplicably hates yellow and loves red. He categorizes good days and bad days based upon numbers of cars of a certain colour passing.

To me, and perhaps to you, this does not seem logical. I would categorize my days based upon the events of the day, and my personal performance throughout. I think that this is logic.

From these examples, we can say that even logic is sometimes subjective, because perhaps we are applying what we call logic to what is actually a subjective matter.

For example, if I enjoy tennis, I might say that tennis is a good game. This seems logical, unless I forget the subjective roots and the process behind my evaluation. If someone else believes tennis to be a terrible game, their logic may not make sense.

In much the same way, there is a certain sort of logic within subjective emotional decisions and perceptions. This logic is conditioned by personal and cultural experience, and it is important to remember that it is subjective, just as Christopher's logic on good or bad days is.

The consequence of using subjective

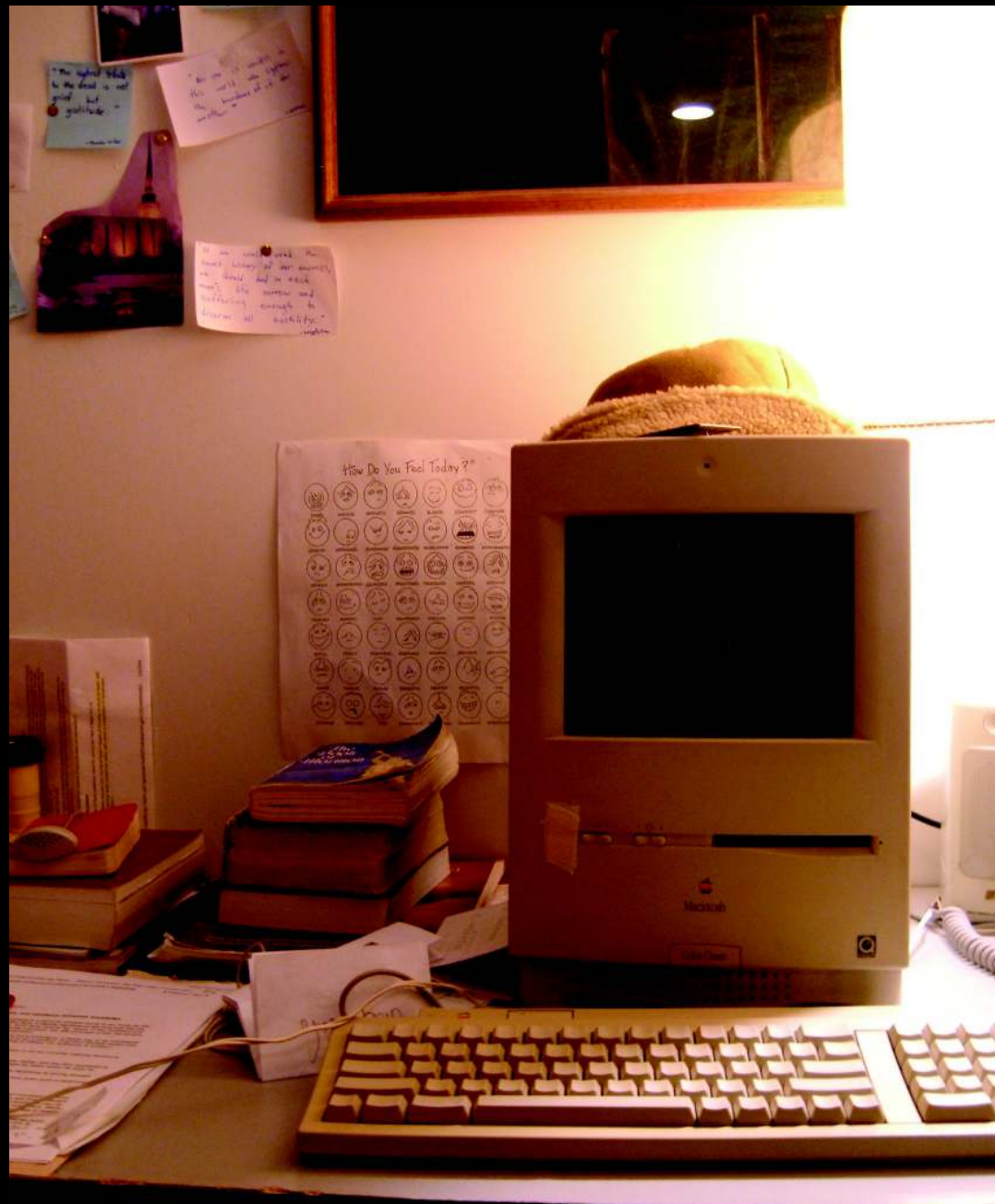
logic in making emotional decisions is, I think, misunderstanding. However, the consequence is also variety, and it displays the varied, almost random behaviours of humans. I think that this is a good thing, misunderstandings aside.

However, I think that even though it seems like there is so much 'logic' that is subjective, we must ask if there really is any objective truth, and how it can be obtained.

I think that there is objective knowledge, and that knowledge is a knowledge of how things were, how they are, and how they will be. Such a scope of knowledge is difficult to obtain.

The import of the photograph, however, is that we all see things differently, and even if we see them the same, our interpretations are typically very subjective, because we are human. Even logic can be subjective, and emotion is the epitome of subjectivity.





# MISUNDERSTANDING

The photograph depicts a computer, beside several items which the computer cannot understand, for they are things which cause and depict subjective human experience.

The computer is a machine of standardized logic, unlike humans, who are very unpredictable, and all different. Humans have differing standards and systems of logic, while the computer understands only what it is designed to understand, if it can understand at all. The computer fulfills a task, the human feels.

One prominent item beside the computer is a poster, the caption of which is, "How Do You Feel Today?" Shown on the poster are a multitude of different emotions, depicted through human facial expressions.

Both the computer and the person understand, for we will use that word even though it slightly personifies the computer, different concepts. To the human, a small drawing of a face may be understood in remembering the emotion depicted, allowing the person to examine themselves and even empathize with themselves, through the depiction of their emotional state.

To the computer, the faces are arcane and incomprehensible. The code of a com-

puter cannot understand these human faces. However, the computer can understand specific types of input and instruction, such as the binary of a sound file, or the physical insertion of a floppy diskette. The computer can even capture stimuli like sound, with its microphones (far left, and above the screen).

A human, however, does not sympathize with binary, and cannot see a library in a floppy disk.

In Haddon's novel, Chris cannot understand the typical understanding of the people around him. Many of the people around him do not understand Chris. This is a symbolic aspect of the photograph.

The statement is clear: the computer and the human understand different things, and they do not really understand each other. Chris cannot understand most others, and most others cannot understand Chris. But the question is, how do they coexist?

In the novel, Chris considers humans to be complicated machines, which are very comparable to computers. Says he, "People think computers are different from people because they don't have minds (...) But the mind is just a complicated machine." (116)

I personally disagree. I think that there

is more to humans than gears and sprockets, or more realistically, protein chains and nucleotides. I think that humans are unique individuals, and that we even have eternal souls.

Chris disagrees heartily, I disagree with Chris. Hence, is there misunderstanding? This is not really a misunderstanding of nature, for we are both human, unlike the computer and the human in the photograph. But we each have our own subjective impressions, as explored in the previous photograph, and can there be misunderstanding mutually even if one, or both, or neither of us is right? Not just in our example, or course, but in life?

I think that even in disagreement over subjective matters of humanity, there is misunderstanding. Regardless of the specific issue at hand, the misunderstanding is in understanding the logic of the opposing side. But if we understand the opposing side, and they understand us, then where is the truth in subjectivity?

Perhaps there is no objective truth in subjective matters, or perhaps as all understanding becomes complete, the objective truth becomes evident.





# INTERPRETATIONS

This photograph, of a photograph, depicts a moustachioed man wielding a gun, and a lady behind him covering her mouth, perhaps in shock.

Each person, when they see other people, is liable to try to assess the situation, and understand it.

For example, we could try to decipher the emotional state of the moustachioed man. Is he deranged? Is he angry? Serious? Is that a smile beneath his moustache? In fact, the moustache looks fake. Is it? Why? And why wear suspenders?

At first glance, it is very difficult to assess exactly what is happening in this likeness. We do not have the circumstances, so we cannot make an interpretation.

What if we have the circumstances? The interpretation will become easier. The man is acting, onstage, a policeman, hence the gun. His lines are serious, yet satirical and comedic. But even still, it is impossible to determine what he was thinking, or even what he was about to do.

We can all make theories, and we can try to ascertain the circumstance. This is a part of our subjective approach to understanding emotions, an approach that is perhaps at the basis of empathy. To imagine the circumstance is perhaps to image

the emotion, since perhaps emotions are formed from circumstance, and decisions based upon it.

Haddon shows us how one might think if they did not imagine possible motives and circumstance. Says Chris, "There is only ever one thing which happened at a particular time and place. And there are an infinite number of things which didn't happen at that time and that place." (19)

Though Chris uses that logic to specifically claim that novels are lies, I think that it applies to his interactions with others. Chris doesn't see what people mean by many facial expressions because he does not imagine what they might mean, because there are too many possibilities.

What are the consequences of his approach? Well, one is certainly that he doesn't understand emotions well. I think that Chris wants all of the facts before he makes a decision. This is very much in harmony with his approach towards understanding life, which, for the most part, is based upon science. He quotes Sherlock Holmes in saying that one must wait for all of the facts, so as to prevent jumping to conclusions.

But I think the people are not predictable. Emotion is subjective, and all of

the information cannot be available to an analyst.

Chris does not take a spontaneous approach to emotion when he can help it, and he prefers to let things rest, and to examine them. He doesn't understand emotions that others feel.

But what can we see about interpretations of people's emotions, especially in light of Chris's character?

As we have already established, emotions are subjective. Hence, when we try to interpret a scene, and especially the emotions involved, it is difficult to do so without portraying different possibilities for circumstance, and coming to our own subjective conclusion based upon the evidences we are offered.

If we cannot create some sort of understanding based upon the incomplete evidences of an emotional situation, we cannot empathize, which is to perhaps understand the emotions felt by the persons involved.



# EMPATHY

This photograph is taken from a veranda, overlooking the street. We know nothing really about the man walking down the street, or the person who appears to be his son. And so, it is difficult to understand them.

From this photo, we can probably ascertain more about the plant to the right, as it is more prominent visually. However, the human is the focus, because we can much more likely understand the human than the plant, regardless of how little data is available.

Why could this be? I think that if every human has his own subjective mind, he is more likely to sympathize with a human, who is more easily understood because of a similar mind.

However, not being able to see, truly, the minds and thoughts and subjective being of others, how is it possible to empathize? How can we know that other humans think like ourselves? Is the process of thought the same? I think that it is impossible to compare one's mind, and one can only make comparisons based upon the actions of others, compared with the remembrance of similar thoughts in our own minds that would have promoted such actions.

Not that people think like this in practice; I think that this process of empathizing is rather ingrained in us. But not for Christopher. Says he, "When I was little I didn't understand about people having minds." (116) For Chris, this makes empathy very difficult, and, therefore, the emotional events surrounding his life are shown to us at a distance.

I think that what we can learn here, is that we focus where we understand. Chris speaks about how people glance at things, and don't really examine them, and I think that this is applicable to how we understand. We don't focus on the plant, because we can't empathize with a plant, and we focus on the man and his son, because we can understand them, because they are human.

The question, though, is if we should be focusing more on the plant. What should we focus on, and try to understand? I think that we should focus on the human, because it makes sense to me, at least, that we should try to help other people. But the plant is important too, because it provides oxygen, and other plants provide food for us. I think that we should try to understand the human, and better his life if we get the opportunity, but we should certainly respect the plant.

Empathy is difficult without knowing the circumstances, but I think that we should make an effort to understand others, in the underlying interests of bettering their lives. Which shouldn't be very difficult, because as humans we understand humans with particular competency.



ata in C Minor  
III

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e homeschooled  
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mi Battista Pescetti  
(ca 1704 - 1766)

18

Study no. 7

Spider on the Ceiling

Stella Goud  
(1960 - )

With fearful apprehension  $\text{♩} = 60 - 66$

pp *simile*  
half pedal throughout

3

5

7 *cresc.*

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0-88790-718-7 / 18

9 *f*

11 *mf*

13 *cresc.*

15 *cresc. molto*  
1 2 3 4



# ART

This photograph depicts sheets, books even, of piano music, as well as a bit of cursive writing practise. All are mounted upon a piano, poised for recital, or further practise.

I think that art is an epitome of subjectivity. Certainly, there are mechanics involved in this music; the harmonies of the notes, the structure of the melody, the frequency of the sinusoid waves of sound emitted by a piano. Those are all generally objective. There is math behind the notes, and the very sound itself.

However, music is an emotional experience as well. There is emotion in its interpretation, and in its creation. Art itself, regardless of its physical mechanics, is a subjective medium.

I think that art, and especially music, can be used as a tool to influence emotion and the subjective feelings of humans. I don't really know if art can be created and felt with different emotions from the artist and the listener, but I do know that music invokes emotions.

As we discussed with the first photograph, logic in emotion is subjective, and so is interpretation of art. Perhaps a beautiful painting would invoke a deep feeling in one person, or perhaps a song would

create an emotion of the same potency in another.

But really, the point is that emotions are to be felt, and they are not specifically to be analysed and picked apart as the process of feeling. To feel emotions, one needs to feel, or to listen for them.

I think that Chris suppresses his emotions, because I think that they are a universal human feature. Though, he does have emotions, and his emotional experience is just as subjective as anyone else's.

I think that emotions are to be felt, but to what end? Perhaps they help us to understand others, and ourselves, more deeply, and can guide our actions. Tools such as music help to convey and refine emotions.

# CONCLUSION

In looking at the subject of subjectivity in emotions, Haddon's novel has provided a framework for discussion of the theme with its view of a bleak, and virtually ignored and suppressed emotional viewpoint.

From our analysis, we have essayed to prove that emotional knowledge is a subjective experience, and the logic behind it is subjective as well. This makes truth in emotion a difficult concept to ascertain and assess. With this in mind, it makes sense that the way to find emotional truth is to feel it, and to condition ourselves to hear our emotions, and from thence, to aid our judgements.

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