

Science And Ethics – Subjective Or Objective?

Summary

Students consider where science and ethics fall along the range of purely subjective to purely objective.

Teacher Instructions

Have students work in pairs with a blank sheet of paper.

Ask them to draw a line, and write ‘Purely subjective – all opinions’ and ‘Purely objective – all facts’ at either ends.

Next, ask them to locate the point where they believe Science falls on the line and draw it in.

Similarly, ask them to draw a point where Ethics falls on the line.

Ask for class discussion on where students have put each.

Emphasize that contrary to popular opinion, science is not purely objective (because it is a human endeavor) nor is ethics purely subjective (because reasoned judgment based on philosophical principles is valued – some arguments are better than others)

Ask students to return to their lines and draw the point where different sciences fall: Physics, Chemistry, Biology, and Social Sciences like Psychology. Ask them to mark where Math falls.

Next, ask them to put down where Personal Preferences fall (for example, preferences for ice cream flavors).

Emphasize that different disciplines are open to different degrees of interpretation. For example, in a math problem there is more of a sense of a ‘correct’ answer than in the interpretation of social phenomena. It should also be clear that ethics is a rigorous discipline, and thus does not consist of ‘all opinions’ like personal preferences. In ethics, reasoned, logical arguments are valued.

This exercise provides a good opportunity to discuss the relation between science and ethics discussed in the Primer Preface section.

Adapted with permission from Bruce Fuchs, PhD