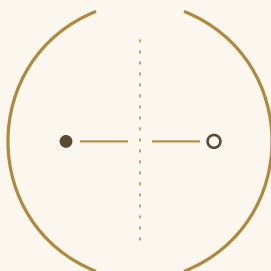


Comparisons

*An Individual Perspective on Objectivity,
Subjectivity, and Relativity*



JAMISON TODD JOHNSON

part of the On —ing series · July 2026

*for Albert Einstein and Carl Jung,
who stood on opposite sides of the same angle,
one facing outward, one facing in,
and asked why until the rest of the world had to think*

συγκρίνοντες — “judging together.”

1 Corinthians 2:13

There is an old Greek verb hiding underneath this title, and I want to hold it up to the light before anything else. When Paul writes of comparing spiritual things with spiritual, the word he reaches for is *synkrinō*: συγκρίνω. *Syn*, with. *Krinō*, to judge, to discern. Judged together. The word carries no scoreboard in it. No ranking, no winner. To compare, in the oldest sense I can find, means to bring two things into one gaze and let them speak to each other.

I love that. We have turned comparison into an envy engine, the quiet arithmetic of *am I enough* that runs in the background of a scrolling thumb. The old word knew nothing of this. It named an act of attention. Two things held together in a single act of discernment, the way you hold two coffees on the counter and taste one against the other, and each cup teaches you something about the other that neither could teach alone.

So I want to hold three words together and listen.

The Three Words

Objective. Subjective. Relative. I grew up treating these like fixed stars. Objective meant the world as it is. Subjective meant the world as it seems to me. Relative was the slippery third thing people invoked when they wanted the argument to end. Then I started reading the history of the words themselves, and the fixed stars began to move.

Objective descends from the Latin *obiectum*, the thing thrown against. *Subjective* descends from *subiectum*, the thing thrown under, the substance that lies beneath its properties and holds everything up. And for centuries these words meant close to the opposite of what they mean now. A medieval scholastic would have told you that the subjective is the real: the substance out there in the world, standing under its own qualities. The objective was what existed in the mind, an object of *thought*, thrown against the inner eye.

When Descartes wrote about the “objective reality” of an idea, he meant its reality as a mental content. The sun had objective being in my thinking and subjective being in the sky. Somewhere on the road through Kant the two words traded places, and we inherited them mid-pirouette without ever noticing the turn.

I am not raising this to be clever. It carries weight. The vocabulary we use to divide the world into what is and what seems has itself swapped meanings within recorded memory. If the wall between objective and subjective were as solid as we pretend, the bricks would not wander like that. What I found in the etymology was a hinge where I had been promised a wall. Hinges exist for turning.

Which leaves the third word, the quiet one. *Relative* comes from *referre*, to carry back. A relative thing points beyond itself; it carries you back to something else. Most of my life I heard the word used as a shrug. Well, it’s all relative. As though pointing beyond yourself were a weakness. I have come to believe it is the most honest word of the three, and the rest of this essay is my attempt to say why.

What the Small Things Know

The observer effect may be the most misquoted idea in modern science, so let me handle it the way I have tried to handle every borrowed instrument in this series: carefully, with the seam showing.

It does not say that consciousness conjures reality. The universe was not holding its breath for billions of years, waiting for someone to look. What the physics actually says is humbler and stranger. To measure a quantum system is to interact with it, and no interaction is gentle enough to leave the system untouched. The photon that lets me see the electron also nudges the electron. Measurement is a meeting, not a window. I cannot know without

touching, and I cannot touch without changing the thing I wanted to know.

Carlo Rovelli takes one further step, and his step is the one I need here. In his relational reading of quantum mechanics, the properties of a system are values that exist relative to whatever the system is interacting with. Facts live between things. Down at that grain there is no view from nowhere, only views from somewhere, and the world stops looking like a warehouse of objects that occasionally relate. It starts looking like a weave of relations that, here and there, hold still long enough to be called objects.

If you want to see how deep the relating goes, look at the quark. No one has ever seen one alone. Our instruments are not the problem; aloneness is something a quark cannot do. Physicists call it confinement. Quarks exist only in bound company, and the harder you pull two of them apart, the more fiercely the bond insists, until the energy of your own pulling creates new partners rather than a free quark. Even the mass is relational. Add up the intrinsic mass of the quarks inside a proton and you account for roughly one percent of its weight. The other ninety-nine percent is binding energy, the cost and gift of the relationship itself. I find that figure almost devotional. I am made of protons and neutrons, which means I am made, by weight, almost entirely of relation.

Let me mark my seam, as always. The confinement and the mass decomposition are physics, measured and established, as objective as anything we own. What I do with them next is framework, mine, and I will not dress it as more. But I no longer think it is an accident that when we finally reached the foundation of matter we did not find little standalone objects down there. We found *referre*. We found things that carry you back to other things.

The I That Depends on the Thou

Martin Buber saw this in people decades before I saw it in particles. Everyone remembers his two ways of meeting the world, the I–It of use and measurement and the I–Thou of full presence. The part that undoes me is subtler. Buber insists the *I* itself differs between the pairs. There is no freestanding I that picks its mode like a coat off a hook. The I of I–It and the I of I–Thou are different selves. Who I am is constituted by how I am meeting. “All actual life is encounter,” he wrote, and he meant it at the level of being: the relation comes first, and the selves precipitate out of it like salt from seawater.

Set that beside Rovelli and the rhyme is hard to miss. A property exists relative to an interaction. An I exists relative to a meeting. The scholastics’ *subiectum*, the substance standing under everything, alone and self-sufficient, turns out to be rare in this universe if it exists at all. What is common, from the proton to the person, is the between.

This is where the jays framework has been pointing since the first essay, though I usually said it in harder language. A life is not a sealed object broadcasting into the void. A life is a term in a superposition with every life it touches, and alignment, the deliberate, attentive facing of one’s Intent, is a relationship before it is an achievement. Relationships are exactly the kind of thing that cannot exist alone.

The Mirror

Paul got here first, too. *Blepomen gar arti di’ esoptrou en ainigmati*: for now we see through a mirror, in a riddle. The King James gives us “through a glass, darkly,” and it is beautiful, but the Greek says mirror, and the difference matters to me. A glass is something you look through toward

what lies beyond it. A mirror hands you back an image already entangled with your own looking. Paul's claim is that all our present knowing is mirror-knowing. Knowing in part. Knowing that carries the knower's face inside it. Every act of knowledge is subjective and objective at once, and the bronze mirror of Corinth is the honest emblem of that entanglement.

He does not stop there. A few pages on, in the second letter, he uses a stranger word, *katoptrizomenoi*, beholding as in a mirror, and attaches a promise to it: that we are transformed into the same image we behold. The mirror stops being an emblem of limited knowing and becomes a mechanism of becoming. We grow toward what we steadily behold.

I want to carry that out of the Greek and into a Tuesday.

You have felt this. You have stood near someone whose calm was real, someone settled all the way down, and felt your own shoulders drop an inch without a word passing between you. I feel it on the warehouse floor at three in the morning, when one steady person can slow the whole line's breathing. Researchers call the mild version emotional contagion. We catch feeling from faces and postures and voices, mostly beneath awareness, and in close interaction there is decent evidence that our physiology itself begins to synchronize: heart rhythms, skin conductance, the body's quiet weather falling into step with another body's. My seam again, because honesty is load-bearing in this series. The showier claims, that moods propagate across whole social networks three friendships deep, remain genuinely contested. The mirror-neuron story that pop science adores has been sold well past its data. I will not build on sand and call it stone. But the near-field effect, the person-to-person mirror, holds up, and you never needed the studies to believe it.

This is what I have started to mean by comparing. *Synkrinō*. Two lives brought into one gaze and judged together. When I live mindfully in front of another person, I am not instructing anyone. I am offering a comparison

in the old sense: my settled hour held quietly beside their unsettled one, no commentary attached, the discernment left to happen inside them. The mirror does the teaching. They behold, and beholding, they begin, sometimes, slowly, freely, to be transformed toward what they see. A few essays ago I would have written *constructive interference* and backed it with a functional. Today I will only say that calm is contagious in the direction of your Intent. Live so that catching what you have is a mercy.

Three Ways of Asking

Before the close, I want to try the triad on the disciplines themselves, the three great ways I know of asking, and see whether it holds.

Science is objective. I mean the recovered sense. Science is the long apprenticeship to the *obiectum*, the thrown-against. I throw a hypothesis at the world and the world throws back. The entire method is a way of arranging that meeting so reality keeps its veto, so that what returns from the encounter is more than my own face. That is science's peculiar humility, and its glory. It is the practice of letting the other side of the relation speak loudest.

Philosophy is subjective, and I mean the old, honorable sense. Philosophy is the discipline of the *subiectum*, the one who stands under experience and holds it up. It is the asker examining the asking. Its instrument is the very self it studies, which is why it can never manage science's arm's length and should stop apologizing for the fact. Someone has to attend to the thrown-under. Someone has to ask what it is like to be the place where the world lands.

And mathematics is relative. Here the triad earns its keep, because mathematics is the purest *referre* our species has ever produced. Math has no substance at all. A number is nothing beyond its place in a structure;

strip the relations away and no residue remains, no little pebble of *seven* left on the table. The philosophers of mathematics who call themselves structuralists say it plainly: mathematics studies positions in patterns. Relation, distilled, set walking on its own. And this softens, at least for me, the puzzle Wigner named the unreasonable effectiveness of mathematics, the scandal that a discipline with no material describes the material world so uncannily well. The scandal shrinks if the world's foundation is not material either. If the deepest layer is relation, then mathematics works because it is the native tongue of the between, and physics is what it sounds like when the between speaks about itself.

Press on any corner of this triad, though, because the pressing is the point. Science, pushed to its floor, finds the observer standing inside the experiment, the subject it tried to bracket waiting patiently at the bottom of the apparatus. Philosophy, done honestly, keeps reaching past the self toward what would be true for anyone. Mathematics is thought by minds and answered by galaxies, strung like a carried word between the two. The triad is one relation faced from three directions, and the dedication of this piece already knew it. Einstein faced the angle outward. Jung faced it inward. The space between them was never empty. It was where the *why* traveled, carried back and forth.

The Turn

Three words, judged together.

Objective, the thrown-against: the world's side of the meeting. Subjective, the thrown-under: the self's side. Relative, the carrying-back, which turned out to be the ground the other two stand on rather than the weak third word I was taught. The scholastic inversion was never an embarrassment. It

was the vocabulary itself confessing that subject and object are two ends of one relation, and that the relation is the real.

The quark knows it. The photon that cannot look without touching knows it. Buber's I, different in every meeting, knows it. Paul's mirror knows it, riddles it, and makes a promise through it.

And I find, as this series begins to bend, as I turn from the far cosmology toward the near country of the mind where the next years of my education will be spent, that this is the thought I want to carry across the threshold. Psychology, whatever else it turns out to be, is the study of the thrown-under: the *subiectum*, the one who stands beneath experience and holds it up. I am going there next. I go carrying the lesson of the small things, that no subject stands under anything alone, that the self, like the quark, is confined, bound into company, most of its weight arising from its bonds.

For now we see in a mirror, in a riddle. But we do not look alone, and we do not look unchanged, and neither does anyone standing near us.

That is the comparison. Judge it together.

Endnotes

1. **συγκρίνω (synkrinō).** 1 Corinthians 2:13, πνευματικοῖς πνευματικὰ συγκρίνοντες — “comparing (combining, interpreting) spiritual things with spiritual.” From σύν (with, together) + κρίνω (to judge, discern). BDAG glosses the range as “compare, combine, explain, interpret.” The English “compare” (Latin *comparare*, from *com-* + *par*, “equal”) shares the structure: to pair together.
2. **The scholastic inversion of objective and subjective.** In medieval usage, *esse subiectivum* denoted existence in reality (as a *subiectum*, an underlying substance), while *esse obiectivum* denoted existence as an object of thought in the mind — usage found in Duns Scotus and William of Ockham, and still present in Descartes’ *Meditations* (1641), where the “objective reality” of an idea is its representational content. The modern senses consolidate through and after Kant, whose precise role remains debated among historians of the terms. See Lorraine Daston, “How Probabilities Came to Be Objective and Subjective,” *Historia Mathematica* 21 (1994): 330–344; Lorraine Daston & Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (Zone Books, 2007), esp. ch. 1.
3. **The observer effect, honestly stated.** Quantum measurement is physical interaction, not conscious witnessing; decoherence and measurement occur with or without minds. For the standard corrective to the pop reading, see Maximilian Schlosshauer, *Decoherence and the Quantum-to-Classical Transition* (Springer, 2007). This essay makes no claim that consciousness collapses anything.
4. **Relational quantum mechanics.** Carlo Rovelli, “Relational Quantum Mechanics,” *International Journal of Theoretical Physics* 35 (1996): 1637–1678 (doi:10.1007/BF02302261); popularized in Rovelli, *Helgoland* (2020; Eng. trans. 2021). Physical variables take values relative to other systems; there are no observer-independent quantum states. QBism (Fuchs, Mermin, Schack) offers the complementary “subjective” reading, treating quantum probabilities as an agent’s personal degrees of belief.
5. **Color confinement and proton mass.** Quarks are never observed in isolation; they exist only in color-neutral bound states, and the energy of separation produces new quark–antiquark pairs rather than free quarks. Quark rest masses account for roughly 1% of the proton’s mass; the remainder arises from QCD binding and gluon field energy. See Y.-B. Yang et al., “Proton Mass Decomposition from the

- QCD Energy-Momentum Tensor,” *Physical Review Letters* 121, 212001 (2018) (doi:10.1103/PhysRevLett.121.212001).
6. **Buber.** Martin Buber, *Ich und Du* (1923); English: *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (1937) and Walter Kaufmann (1970). The dual constitution of the I (“The I of the basic word I-You is different from that of the basic word I-It,” Kaufmann trans., First Part) and “All actual life is encounter” (Kaufmann; Gregor Smith renders it “All real living is meeting”; German: *Alles wirkliche Leben ist Begegnung*).
 7. **The mirror texts.** 1 Corinthians 13:12, βλέπομεν γὰρ ἄρτι δι’ ἐσόπτρου ἐν αἰνίγματι — “for now we see through a mirror, in a riddle” (ἐσόπτρον = mirror; Corinth was a noted producer of bronze mirrors). 2 Corinthians 3:18, κατοπτριζόμενοι (“beholding as in a mirror,” middle voice; some render “reflecting”) ... τὴν αὐτὴν εἰκόνα μεταμορφούμεθα — “are being transformed into the same image.” Critical text: NA28.
 8. **Emotional contagion and synchrony.** Elaine Hatfield, John Cacioppo & Richard Rapson, *Emotional Contagion* (Cambridge UP, 1994); on interpersonal physiological synchrony, see R. V. Palumbo et al., “Interpersonal Autonomic Physiology: A Systematic Review,” *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 21, no. 2 (2017): 99–141 (doi:10.1177/1088868316628405).
 9. **Fenced claims.** Network-level contagion of happiness and behavior (Christakis & Fowler, *BMJ* 2008 and related) remains methodologically contested (see Lyons 2011, “The Spread of Evidence-Poor Medicine via Flawed Social-Network Analysis,” *Statistics, Politics, and Policy*); mirror-neuron explanations of human empathy are widely regarded as oversold (Gregory Hickok, *The Myth of Mirror Neurons*, Norton, 2014). This essay’s “mirror effect” relies only on near-field, person-to-person findings, plus framework claims explicitly marked as such.
 10. **Mathematical structuralism and Wigner.** On numbers as positions in structures rather than objects: Paul Benacerraf, “What Numbers Could Not Be,” *Philosophical Review* 74, no. 1 (1965): 47–73; Stewart Shapiro, *Philosophy of Mathematics: Structure and Ontology* (Oxford UP, 1997). Eugene Wigner, “The Unreasonable Effectiveness of Mathematics in the Natural Sciences,” *Communications on Pure and Applied Mathematics* 13, no. 1 (1960): 1–14 (doi: 10.1002/cpa.3160130102). The suggestion that a relational ontology softens Wigner’s puzzle is a framework claim, marked as such.

11. **The triad in philosophy.** Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford UP, 1986), on the objective–subjective polarity as a matter of degree; Nietzsche’s perspectivism (*On the Genealogy of Morality* III.12: knowing as always perspectival); on relational ontology in physics, Michael Esfeld, “Quantum Entanglement and a Metaphysics of Relations,” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Modern Physics* 35 (2004): 601–617.

The *On* —*ing* Series

Twenty-three pieces and growing, designed to be read in any order. Comparisons is the newest entry, and the first to step outside the naming pattern — a hinge piece, as the series turns toward the philosophy of psychology.

On Arriving
On Being
On Creating
On Dreaming
On Existing
On Facing
On Feeling
On Finding
On Forgiving
On Growing
On Lasting
On Learning

On Living
On Meeting
On Observing
On Remembering
On Rising
On Searching
On Seeing
On Teaching
On Testing
On Watching
On Witnessing
Comparisons

JAMISON TODD JOHNSON

Kansas City, Missouri

July 2026

.

Legible Traces · legibletraces.com

DOI: [on file]

Licensed under CC BY 4.0

Set in Fraunces, EB Garamond, and Cinzel.