Objective and Subjective Tests in the Law

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Objective and Subjective Tests in the Law

Abstract
Across many subject areas, the law commonly attempts to distinguish between objective and subjective tests, and to assess the merits of objective as opposed to subjective legal tests. This Article argues that all such efforts are fundamentally incoherent and ultimately futile in practice. As demonstrated below, what the law takes to be objective in the relevant sense is essentially constituted by what the law takes to be subjective, and vice versa. Judicial preoccupation with objective and subjective tests thus does no more than distract from more meaningful concerns. Judicial attention should be directed away from this hopeless distinction, and instead focused on devising tests that best reflect the substantive interests at stake in any given context.

Keywords
subjective tests, objective tests, court
Objective and Subjective Tests in the Law

R. George Wright*

ABSTRACT

Across many subject areas, the law commonly attempts to distinguish between objective and subjective tests, and to assess the merits of objective as opposed to subjective legal tests. This Article argues that all such efforts are fundamentally incoherent and ultimately futile in practice. As demonstrated below, what the law takes to be objective in the relevant sense is essentially constituted by what the law takes to be subjective, and vice versa. Judicial preoccupation with objective and subjective tests thus does no more than distract from more meaningful concerns. Judicial attention should be directed away from this hopeless distinction, and instead focused on devising tests that best reflect the substantive interests at stake in any given context.

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INTRODUCTION

The law takes largely for granted that there are meaningful and important distinctions, in various contexts, between objective and subjective legal tests. The law tends to focus instead on endless controversies over when to apply a supposedly objective test, and when to apply a supposedly subjective test.

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Disputes over the merits of supposedly objective and subjective tests thus pervade the law. Such disputes recur, for example, in various contractual, commercial, and business law contexts;\(^1\) in contexts of negligently, recklessly, or intentionally committed torts;\(^2\) in criminal law and sentencing contexts such as those involving probable cause, search and seizure, property forfeitures, entrapment, and death penalty eligibility;\(^3\) in Title VII employment discrimination cases;\(^4\) in Section 1983 qualified immunity cases;\(^5\) in numerous First Amendment contexts;\(^6\) and in cases involving a combination of allegedly ineffective assistance of counsel and defendant deportability.\(^7\)

Distinctions between objectivity and subjectivity in one sense or another are important in fields apart from the law, including, merely for example, probability theory,\(^8\) moral philosophy,\(^9\) and philosophy more generally.\(^10\) Legal theorists as well have addressed issues regarding the meaning and proper scope of supposedly objective and subjective tests,\(^11\) usually with reference to what a presumed “reasonable person” or else some broad group, would or might think in a given situation.\(^12\)

But as it turns out, the case law should inspire skepticism as to the value—and indeed the sheer coherence—of distinctions between supposedly objective

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1 \textit{See infra} Section I.

2 \textit{See infra} Section II.

3 \textit{See infra} Section II.

4 \textit{See infra} Section III.

5 \textit{See infra} Section III.

6 \textit{See infra} Section IV.

7 \textit{See infra} Section V.


9 \textit{See, e.g.}, \textit{Stephen Darwall, Philosophical Ethics} 19 (1998) (“[T]hat we take ourselves to be fallible and never fully able to transcend our own subjective standpoints is itself evidence of the objective purport of ethical opinions.”); Henry Sidgwick, \textit{The Methods of Ethics} 207 (Hackett 1981) (1907) (“[N]o act can be absolutely right . . . which is believed by the agent to be wrong. Such an act we may
call ‘subjectively’ wrong, even though ‘objectively’ right.” (footnote omitted)); Dale Dorsey, Objective Morality, Subjective Morality, and the Explanatory Question, 6 J. ETHICS & SOC. PHIL. 1, 2 (2012) (explaining that subjective views assess “the moral quality of actions in a way that is sensitive to agents’ epistemic circumstances,” whereas objective views do not).


10 See, e.g., RICHARD RORTY, OBJECTIVITY, RELATIVISM, AND TRUTH 21 (1991) (regarding “objectivity” as supposedly transcending real or even imaginary groups); LORRAINE DASTON & PETER GALISON, OBJECTIVITY 379 (2010) (“All the multiple senses of objectivity intersect in their opposition to subjectivity”); SANDRA HARDING, OBJECTIVITY AND DIVERSITY: ANOTHER LOGIC OF SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH x (2015) (“[O]bjectivity ‘is not a single idea, but rather a sprawling collection of assumptions, attitudes, aspirations, and antipathies,’” and is at best “an essentially contested concept”).

For a more substantive discussion, see NICHOLAS RESCHER, OBJECTIVITY: THE OBLIGATIONS OF IMPARTIAL REASON 7 (1997) (“An objective judgment . . . abstracts from personal idiosyncrasies or group parochialisms. It is a judgment made without the influence of individual or communal preferences and predilections.”); John McDowell, Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective, 67 PHIL. & PHENOM. RES. 675, 676 (2003) (“This mutual intelligibility between ourselves and others requires us to conceive objective reality as common ground between ourselves and our interlocutors, potential and actual.”); V.J. McGill, Subjective and Objective Methods in Philosophy, 41 J. PHIL. 421, 421 n.1 (1944) (“Data are ‘objective’ if observable by more than one person and ‘subjective’ when observable by only one.”).

11 See, e.g., LARRY ALEXANDER, CRIME AND CULPABILITY: A THEORY OF CRIMINAL LAW 31 (2009) (“[P]roperly understood, recklessness is a subjective concept that tracks the defendant’s assessment of the risk.”); KENT GREENAWALT, LAW AND OBJECTIVITY 93 (1995) (distinguishing objectivity as external, or as linked to reasonableness, from subjectivity as internal or personalized); MATTHEW KRAMER, OBJECTIVITY AND THE RULE OF LAW 3 (“Every variety of objectivity is opposed to a corresponding variety of subjectivity.”); id. at 94 (explaining one variety of objectivity as involving properties “whose nature can be fully specified without reference to certain actual or potential experiences in human beings”); Heidi Li Feldman, Objectivity in Legal Judgment, 92 MICH. L. REV. 1187, 1187 (1994) (“[M]any are ready to discontinue talk of objectivity altogether, on the grounds that it has been nothing more than a mask for the oppressive practices of politically and economically privileged groups, promising neutrality where in fact there are only power relations.”); David M. Paciocco, Subjective and Objective Standards of Fault For Offenses and Defenses, 59 SASK. L. REV. 271, 272 (1995) (“[T]he distinction [between objective
and subjective legal tests. What is thought by the law to be subjective actually pervades and informs, in multiple ways, what is thought to be objective, and vice versa. The objective and the subjective, in effect, unavoidably help define and comprise each other. The law’s attempts, in various contexts, to differentiate or combine objective and subjective tests are thus inevitably fruitless.  

Ultimately, the law should seek to avoid relying on these incoherent categories. Instead, the law should strive to devise tests that ask precisely what to take into account, and precisely how to do so, in adopting rules and adjudicating cases. The answers will vary according to context. Crucially, though, all such answers must recognize any overriding constraints of fairness applied to the relevant parties, and then seek to enhance some version of an

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12 Interestingly, courts sometimes distinguish reasonable beliefs from broad community standards. See Pope v. Illinois, 481 U.S. 497 (1987) (assessing “value” and the application of “community standards” in the obscenity context); see also R.M. Hare, MORAL THINKING: ITS LEVELS, METHOD AND POINT 210–11 (1981) (in the context of provocation, one sense of an objective test “asks whether a reasonable man would have been provoked”); SHELY KAGAN, NORMATIVE ETHICS 65 (1989) (linking what a presumably reasonable person would have believed to a subjective account of rightness); Lisa J. Bernt, Finding the Right Jobs For the Reasonable Person in Employment Law, 77 UMKC L. REV. 1, 1 (2008) (“Historically, courts have invoked the reasonable person when looking to set some ‘objective’ or universal (as opposed to ‘subjective’ or individualized) standard of conduct.”); Christopher Jackson, Reasonable Persons, Reasonable Circumstances, 50 SAN. DIEGO L. REV. 651, 655 (2013) (in determining what counts as a legally relevant circumstance, “[t]he physical features of the situation will likely be included, while the particular peccadillos of the defendant probably will not”); Johnson, supra note 8, at 428 (“[T]he reasonable-person construct is ‘indeterminate through and through.’” (quoting Larry Alexander, Inculpatory and Exculpatory Mistakes and the Fact/Law Distinction: An Essay in Memory of Myke Bayles12 L. & Phil. 33, 51 (1993))); Neil McCormick, Reasonableness and Objectivity, 74 NOTRE DAME L. REV. 1575, 1576 (1999) (linking the behavior of the reasonable person with “the common standards of the community”); Alan D. Miller & Ronen Perry, The Reasonable Person, 87 N.Y.U. L. REV. 323 (2012); Peter Westen, Individualizing the Reasonable Person in Criminal Law, 2 CRIM. L. & PHIL. 137, 138 (2008) (“Reasonableness in criminal law is an objective standard; i.e., a standard that an actor’s conduct, mental states and/or emotions may or may not succeed in satisfying.”).

13 The inescapable incoherence of any distinction between objective and subjective legal tests goes beyond the mutual dependence of the concepts involved. There is, for example, no full understanding of an even number without the idea of an odd number. But that sort of mutual dependence is benign. The even number versus odd number distinction is coherent in a way that the objective test versus subjective legal test distinction is not.
overall well-being within those constraints. The focus of legal tests should thus be on substance and procedure, as opposed to the hopelessly distracting labels of subjectivity and objectivity.

In the end, one might try to replace futile quests for subjective or objective tests by aiming specifically at the attractive goal of promoting equality. Despite the constitutional and normative appeal of equality, however, taking this path would ultimately be inadvisable. This is largely because even among persons of the greatest insight and benevolence, the idea of equality quickly fractures into a variety of more or less conflicting visions. If any single underlying substantive aim can usefully, if imperfectly, inform legal decision-making in the place of futilely pursuing supposedly objective and subjective tests, that aim may instead be the related idea of community. While the idea of reasonably promoting community through law can take multiple forms, the direct conflicts among visions of community may be less stark and irreconcilable than those involving conflicting visions of equality.

We seek to validate each of these basic claims gradually, cumulatively, and inductively, across various legal contexts, beginning immediately below.

I. OBJECTIVE AND SUBJECTIVE TESTS IN CONTRACTUAL, COMMERCIAL, AND RELATED CASES

The basic law of contract formation and interpretation introduces some considerations that are crucial for our purposes. It is often suggested that interpretation of contracts is somehow a matter of discerning and giving effect to the mutual intent of the contracting parties. On a natural reading, this might suggest that contract law seeks somehow to appreciate the subjective, real, or genuine intent of the parties. But courts are often quick to draw back from any such inquiry, focusing instead on what they apparently imagine to be an independent, more public, more determinate, more reasonableness-oriented, and more standardized inquiry into supposedly objective considerations.

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Even if we take the “objective” approach at face value, cracks in the theory quickly begin to emerge. An objective expression of intent is to be determined by what one contracting party “would,” on the basis of the other contracting party’s actions, tend to believe about that party’s intent. However, what somebody would believe is different than what somebody could, or even might, reasonably believe. One can hardly claim that ordinary contractual language typically bears only one reasonable interpretation, such that a reasonable person relying on the contractual terms would be bound to one specific interpretation, rather than to a range of reasonable, but potentially conflicting, interpretations.

Even more importantly, consider the subjectivities unavoidably involved in selecting, or describing, the reasonable contracting party (or some other reasonable interpreter of the contractual terms). We must choose to describe that reasonable person’s circumstances, in one way or another. Are we to start with the non-drafting party, impute reasonableness to that party in all relevant respects, and then discount or ignore any supposedly unreasonable qualities, biases, cognitive limits, values, priorities, quirks, or idiosyncrasies, whether previously known to either party or not? Without attempting at this early point to resolve the question, we pause merely to note that the idea of a reasonable contracting party, no less than the idea of a reasonable or impartial spectator, is massively indeterminate and undertheorized. The idea of a reasonable contracting party is, with rich irony, largely subjective in more than one sense. Let us also momentarily set aside questions of which circumstances involved in a case are relevant, weighty, controlling, or trivial.

Contract cases and contract theorists thus not surprisingly often try to limit the dominance of any supposedly objective model of contract


17 For a classic discussion, see William Empson, Seven Types of Ambiguity (1996 ed.) (1930).

18 For a brief introduction to the reasonable person standard, see supra note 12 and accompanying text.

19 See supra note 9 and accompanying text.


21 See, e.g., Lawrence M. Solan, Contract as Agreement, 83 NOTRE DAME L. REV. 353, 354 (2007); Recent Case, Contracts—Mutual Assent, 40 HARV. L. REV. 645, 645 (1927); see also Kabil Dev. Corp. v. Mignot, 566 P.2d 505, 508 (Or. 1977) (noting
interpretation. One court, for example, legitimizes both objective standards, which supposedly apply “external criteria” to the ascertaining of meaning, and subjective standards, which supposedly refer to “the state of mind of one or more parties to the agreement.” Another court explained that “subjective intent” is “indicative of objective intent,” and therefore “subjective intent may be one of the factors which comprises objective intent.” On such a view, curiously, we are assumed to know a party’s subjective, internal intent, and then use that knowledge to infer objective, external intent.

Courts often adopt a supposedly more subjective approach to contract interpretation in so-called party-satisfaction cases, and even then with some crucial complications. For example, a court may claim to apply a more subjective test where the key issue of contractual performance seems to be one of “fancy, taste, sensibility, and judgment,” but not where the contractual dispute focuses on “commercial value, operative or mechanical fitness, or quality.” Thus, apparently, matters of judgment are thought to be more subjective, whereas matters of quality are thought to tend to be more objective. This dichotomization raises obvious difficulties. One might wonder, for example, whether a sports car’s performance is a matter of judgment or quality. Does such a question have a subjective or an objective character? As this simple example illustrates, determining when a subjective test or an objective test is required is not as simple as these courts assume.

Adding a further complication, the courts in party-satisfaction cases declare that reasonableness is irrelevant to subjective tests, but also that claims of party dissatisfaction as to performance are “limited . . . by the duty of good faith.” The duty of good faith, however, necessarily involves an element of reasonableness. Thus, in these cases, the courts re-introduce elements of purported objectivity into supposedly subjective tests.

The profound and inescapable murkiness of the distinction between objective and subjective tests is further illustrated in typical commercial law that the originally objectively-minded Professor Arthur Corbin eventually concluded that an objective or subjective test, alone, cannot fully explain the law of contracts).

22 See N.A.P.P. Realty Tr., 784 A.2d at 1169.
23 Id. (quoting 11 SAMUEL WILLISTON, CONTRACTS § 31:1, at 256 (4th ed. 1999)).
24 Id.
25 Smith, 553 A.2d at 133.
27 Id. For a similar attempt at such a dichotomization, see AMFAC v. Waikiki Beachcomber Inv. Co., 829 P.2d 10, 23 (Haw. 1992).
28 See Crum, 62 P.3d at 1041.
29 For discussion of either the purported objectivity or subjectivity of “good faith” in various commercial contexts, despite the term’s apparent subjective focus, see infra note 30.
Consider, merely for example, a dispute over whether a particular defect in some good qualifies as a substantial defect, so as to justify a buyer's revocation of acceptance. Many courts have concluded that such a legal determination involves supposedly "subjective and objective aspects." One such court explained that "the subjective component of the test takes into consideration the particular buyer's needs and expectations," whereas, in

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30 See, e.g., Choice Escrow & Land Title, LLC v. BancorpSouth Bank, 754 F.3d 611, 622 (8th Cir. 2014) (observing that "good faith" in the commercial context has a [supposedly] subjective component of "honesty in fact" and a [supposedly] objective component of observing "reasonable commercial standards of fair dealing," but failing to note that these labels could with some justification be reversed); State Bank of the Lakes v. Kansas Bankers Surety Co., 328 F.3d 906, 909 (7th Cir. 2003) (Easterbrook, J.) (positing that "good faith' usually establishes a subjective standard, while due care is objective. Why write 'in good faith' if you mean 'in the exercise of reasonable care?'" and thus declining to recognize purportedly objective elements in the former, or purportedly subjective elements in the latter); Kansas City Power & Light Co. v. Ford Motor Credit Co., 995 F.2d 1422, 1430 (8th Cir. 1993) (noting that good faith is an "amorphous" concept); Schwegmann Bank & Trust Co. v. Simmons, 880 F.2d 838, 841–42 (5th Cir. 1989) (noting conflict over whether "good faith" of a holder in due course focuses on "subjective or objective knowledge and conduct" and that "good faith" does not involve a duty to investigate unless "the circumstances [objectively] reveal a deliberate desire" to evade knowledge for [objectively] improper reasons); Luedtke v. Nabors Alaska Drilling, Inc., 834 P.2d 1220, 1224 (Ala. 1992) (interpreting UCC § 1-208 and reasoning, "[w]hile the debtor's burden of proof may be difficult because the debtor must delve into the creditor's state of mind, the burden is not impossible. That is, the debtor may . . . establish lack of good faith by proving that the creditor did not have possession of the [relevant] information" and thus evidently proving the apparently inaccessibly subjective by the apparently objective); Wohlrabe v. Pownell, 307 N.W.2d 478, 483 (Minn. 1981) ("We have . . . discussed the good faith requirement in Article 3 as a subjective standard rather than an objective standard."); Triffin v. Liccardi Ford, Inc., 10 A.3d 227, 229 (N.J. Super. Ct. App. Div. 2011) ("'[A] holder in due course must satisfy both a subjective and objective test of good faith.'" (internal quotations omitted) (quoting Triffin v. Pomerantz Staffing Servs., 851 A.2d 100, 104 (N.J. Super. Ct. App. Div. 2004))); J.R. Hale Contracting Co. v. United N.M. Bank, 799 P.2d 581, 591 (N.M. 1990) (noting "honesty in fact is subjective and is concerned with the actual state of mind of the creditor," but should be determined "on the facts and circumstances"); Tolbert v. First Nat'l Bank, 823 P.2d 965, 970 (Or. 1991) (noting that the question of a bank's "good faith" should be decided by the reasonable contractual expectations of the parties," thereby further blurring any possible objective test versus subjective test contrast in this context (emphasis in original)); R.R. Comm'n v. Gulf Energy Expl. Corp., 482 S.W.2d 559, 568 (Tex. 2016) (referencing Black's Law Dictionary as defining good faith as "a state of mind" involving "reasonable commercial standards").


32 Id.
supposed contrast, “[t]he objective element focuses on the actual defects, which must not be trivial or insubstantial.”

Any such formulation may seem, on its face, sensible enough. But as an attempt to coherently distinguish between a subjective and an objective consideration, this formula is unsuccessful. Much of the point of referring to something as a “need,” as above, in typical contexts, is to distinguish a genuine need from a presumably more subjective “want” or “desire.” In the human rights context, for example, the emphasis is often on objective, rather than subjective, aspects of needs and corresponding basic interests. And we can certainly imagine a judge interpreting the idea of needs in an apparently objective light (any judicial test formulation to the contrary).

Correspondingly, it is far from obvious that debates over whether a defect in a commercial good should be considered “trivial” or “insubstantial” should count as objective, and not as subjective, in character. Suppose, for example, the buyer of a used book reasonably anticipates no underlining or marginal comments therein. It turns out that the book in question does have some underlining and marginal commentary, and is thus, we may assume, to some degree either subjectively or objectively defective. We must now ask whether this defectiveness is trivial or insubstantial. A court might imagine that such a question has an objectively-natured answer. But one could easily argue that this inquiry is actually largely subjective.

Consider, for example, a law student who buys a used casebook. This student prefers a relatively unmarked copy, but also, subjectively, values the yellow highlighting of case holdings by the previous owner. Why isn’t the question of the possible “triviality” or “insubstantiality” of this defect largely subjective? Suppose another buyer of a used book intends to present the used book to a third party in nearly pristine, unmarked condition, as a gift, with some emphasis thus on appearance and aesthetics. If the defect in the good in such cases is judicially considered to be substantial, it is hardly so on grounds we would normally deem to be objective.

The law thus winds up tying itself into verbal knots in seeking to meaningfully distinguish between objective and subjective tests in the commercial law area. The presumably subjective quality of sheer honesty in belief and action and good faith actually involves an element of objective

33 Id.
35 See Kesner, 378 S.E.2d at 654.
36 Id.
37 Id.
38 Id.
39 See id.
reasonableness, as one could act grossly and irresponsibly irrationally, but honestly and, in some sense, in good faith.

Part of the explanation for the law’s incoherence in this respect may lie in a judicial belief that “[a] subjective good-faith inquiry injects uncertainty into the law of contracts and undermines one of the U.C.C.’s primary goals—to promote certainty and predictability in commercial transactions.” The problem here is that what courts think of as objective tests, based perhaps on what presumably reasonable persons would do under some, if not all, of the presumably relevant circumstances, are no more determinate or predictable in their outcomes than what courts think of as more subjective tests. A supposedly objective reasonable person standard unavoidably involves not only certain subjectivities, but basic indeterminacies, as we further explore throughout the contexts considered below.

II. OBJECTIVE AND SUBJECTIVE TESTS IN TORT AND CRIMINAL CASES

The incoherence of the distinction between objective and subjective test reappears in tort and criminal law contexts. It is common ground that in the crucial area of tort negligence, the courts have never settled upon either a supposedly objective or subjective test. As one scholar explains, “[the question of] whether negligence should be defined objectively or subjectively arises repeatedly and has often been debated, [but] the issue has never been resolved.” This perpetually unresolved debate has been in evidence at least since the classic English hay rick fire case of Vaughan v. Menlove. Attempts to reach some sort of coherent middle ground on the issue are almost as longstanding.

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41 Casserlie v. Shell Oil Co., 902 N.E.2d 1, 5 (Ohio 2009) (internal citations omitted).
43 132 Eng. Rep. 490 (1827) (pitting standards of ordinary prudence and care against good faith action in accordance with the actor’s genuinely best, if somewhat limited, judgment).
44 See, e.g., Commonwealth v. Franklin Pierce, 138 Mass. 165, 179 (1884) (Holmes, J.) (“[Generally,] a man’s liability for his acts is determined by their tendency under the circumstances known to him, and not by their tendency under all the circumstances actually affecting the result, whether known or unknown.”). This mixed formulation omits the further alternative of supposedly objectively considering those circumstances that would have been known to a supposedly reasonable person, under some specified circumstances.
At a moral or legal policy level, the subjective versus objective test conflict has often focused upon the opposing pulls of fairness to individual negligence tort defendants and the safety of negligence tort plaintiffs and the broader public. To accommodate the very real—one might casually say, objective—cognitive or physical limitations of particular negligence defendants would increase the risk of uncompensated injuries to innocent negligence plaintiffs. Concern for reducing the latter risk, however, may violate the popular principle that “ought implies can,” in the sense that moral and legal requirements should not be imposed upon those persons who faultlessly cannot comply with the standard at issue.

Of course, cognitive and psychological limitations of negligence defendants are subjective in the sense that they pertain more directly to a specific individual. They are less than fully subjective, though, in that what we normally take to be personal limitations actually reflect alterable social policies, social perceptions, priorities, and constructs. The limits on the mobility of a person using wheelchair technology are largely socially and legally constructed. But those same limitations on the part of negligence defendants are objective in the sense that they can be introduced to the legal processes through direct evidence.

What we think of as “a purely objective standard” in the negligence context may well actually aspire to no higher form of objectivity than that of a perhaps short-term political or cultural group dominance, or a community sentiment “crystallized by law.” The scope, and the degree of inclusiveness, of the most relevant dominant community in a given negligence case will of course vary. To the extent that the law requires reasonableness in negligence

45 See Schwartz, supra note 42, at 241.
47 See Sinnott-Armstrong, supra note 46.
50 Id.
51 Seavey, supra note 48, at 10.
52 Id.
53 Id.
cases, the law will thus again reflect the various supposedly subjective and objective elements of any such reasonableness standard.\textsuperscript{54}

These inseparabilities of supposedly objective and subjective tests recur in other tort and criminal law-related contexts.\textsuperscript{55} The idea of probable cause, for example, involves various entangled threads of supposedly more and less objective and subjective considerations.\textsuperscript{56} The Supreme Court declared in \textit{Davenpeck v. Alford} that “[w]hether probable cause exists depends upon the reasonable conclusion to be drawn from the facts known to the arresting officer at the time of the arrest.”\textsuperscript{57} This principle already excludes considerations that any reasonable person would know, if those considerations were not actually known, perhaps for individualized or idiosyncratic reasons, to the arresting officer.\textsuperscript{58}

Yet the Court also broadly declared that “an arresting officer’s state of mind (except for the facts that he knows) is irrelevant to the existence of probable cause.”\textsuperscript{59} The Court here assumed, dubiously, that what was actually known to, and sufficiently appreciated by, an arresting officer is always “objective.”\textsuperscript{60} But the law can hardly filter apparently subjective elements out of any such determination.\textsuperscript{61} The determination of whether probable cause exists therefore unavoidably partakes of purportedly objective and subjective elements.

The related area of the entrapment defense to criminal accusations seems at first to involve a primarily subjective test.\textsuperscript{62} The Supreme Court in \textit{Hampton v. United States} explicated that “the entrapment defense focuses on the intent or predisposition of the defendant to commit the crime.”\textsuperscript{63} In so saying, the

\textsuperscript{54} See \textit{id.} at 4 (“[I]n attempting to classify [the negligence defendant’s] conduct as right or wrong, we necessarily carry into our judgment an indefinite amount of our mental equipment, including our own standards and our own will.”).


\textsuperscript{56} See \textit{Davenpeck}, 543 U.S. at 152, 153.

\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Id.} at 152 (citing \textit{Maryland} v. \textit{Pringle}, 540 U.S. 366, 371 (2003)). For a similar mix of objective and subjective considerations, see \textit{A.M. ex rel. F.M.} v. \textit{Holmes}, 830 F.3d 1123, 1138 (10th Cir. 2016).

\textsuperscript{58} \textit{Davenpeck}, 543 U.S. at 152 (citing \textit{Maryland}, 540 U.S. at 371).

\textsuperscript{59} \textit{Id.} at 153 (citing \textit{Wren} v. \textit{United States}, 517 U.S. 806, 912–13 (1996)) (apparently focusing on motives or thought processes of arresting officers).

\textsuperscript{60} \textit{Id.} at 154.

\textsuperscript{61} See, e.g., \textit{Williams} v. \textit{Rodriguez}, 509 F.3d 392, 398–99 (7th Cir. 2007) (“Probable cause is not evaluated . . . based upon ‘the facts as an omniscient observer would perceive them,’ but . . . by the facts ‘as they would have appeared to a reasonable person in the position of the arresting officer.’” (quoting \textit{Kelley} v. \textit{Myler}, 149 F.3d 641, 646 (7th Cir. 1998))).


\textsuperscript{63} \textit{Id.}
Court’s focus may be not so much on the objective versus subjective test distinction, but on distinguishing the defendant’s predisposition from the conduct, or misconduct, of government agents. The Court’s apparent focus on the workings of the defendant’s mind often may be intended in some relatively objective sense. But the Court reverts to literally subjectivist language in then concluding that entrapment arises “only when the government’s deception actually implants the criminal design in the mind of the defendant.” To call the entrapment defense either objective or subjective is thus at best useful in certain limited respects, while being fundamentally misleading in crucial respects.

Thus here and elsewhere the courts continually fail to construct, or coherently distinguish between, objective and subjective tests. Yet they endorse and relentlessly pursue such distinctions.

As it turns out, though, the incoherence of such attempted distinctions comes into play even more prominently in a variety of civil rights-related cases, as we briefly explore immediately below.

III. OBJECTIVE AND SUBJECTIVE TESTS IN CIVIL RIGHTS AND QUALIFIED IMMUNITY CASES

It is well established in the federal law of employment discrimination that a plaintiff alleging hostile environment sexual harassment must satisfy both an

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64 See id. at 488–89.
65 As, roughly, in the oversimplified idea that supposedly “objective facts could be used to determine subjective [i.e., actual or objective] knowledge.” In re Forfeiture of One 1970 Chevrolet Chevelle, 215 P.3d 166, 171 (Wash. 2009) (en banc) (holding that vehicles held not forfeitable due to owners’ lack of actual knowledge of criminal activities).
69 See infra Section III.
objective and a subjective test. The Supreme Court has specified that “a sexually objectionable environment must be both objectively and subjectively offensive, one that a reasonable person would find hostile or abusive, and one that the victim in fact did perceive to be so.”

The latter, assumedly subjective, element is obviously problematic on the broader merits. By its logic, no woman who because of youth, inexperience, or any form of institutionalized socialization believed at the time that the harassment in question was to be accepted as normal can possibly prevail, regardless of how severe or pervasive the harassment was. More illuminating for our purposes is the first, presumably objective, test element, which focuses on offensiveness, or hostility, or abusiveness as judged by “a reasonable person.” This offensiveness must be of a sort not merely that a reasonable person could feel, but that a reasonable person would feel. Taken literally, any degree of dispute among assumedly reasonable persons in this regard would thus entirely undermine the plaintiff’s case.

It has often been suggested, however, that the proper way to formulate this purportedly objective test is not in terms of the perspective of a reasonable person, but in terms of, in appropriate cases, a reasonable woman, or a reasonable victim of the harassment in question. Under this point of view, the supposedly objective hostile environment test should focus on a purportedly “reasonable” person who bears any and all of the particular subjective qualities that the courts somehow take to be legally relevant under the circumstances of the case.

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71 Id. at 787 (citing Harris v. Forklift Sys., Inc., 510 U.S. 17, 21–22 (1993)).
72 Id. The “reasonable person” language is derived from Harris, 510 U.S. at 21.
73 Faragher, 524 U.S. at 787; Harris, 510 U.S. at 21.
74 See, e.g., Ellison v. Brady, 924 F.2d 872, 879 (9th Cir. 1991) (“We realize that there is a broad range of viewpoints among women as a group, but we believe that many women share common concerns which men do not necessarily share.”).
75 See, e.g., id.
76 See, e.g., id. at 878. For a relevant discussion, see Robert S. Adler & Ellen R. Pierce, The Legal, Ethical, and Social Implications of the “Reasonable Woman” Standard in Sexual Harassment Cases, 61 FORDHAM L. REV. 773, 773 n.2 (1993). More broadly, see McGinest v. GTE Service Corp., 360 F.3d 1103, 1112 (9th Cir. 2004) (“In order to survive summary judgment, McGinest must show . . . a genuinely factual dispute as to . . . whether a reasonable African-American man would find his workplace so objectively and subjectively racially hostile as to create an abusive working environment . . . .”). In the context of the “unwelcomeness” element, see Larsa K. Ramsini, The Unwelcomeness Requirement in Sexual Harassment: Choosing a Perspective and Incorporating the Effect of Supervisor-Subordinate Relations, 55 WM. & MARY L. REV. 1961, 1962–63 (2014) (noting the range and variety of perspectives available for potential judicial adoption).
77 Adler & Pierce, supra note 76, at 776.
Among the subjectivities associated with an abstract reasonable person standard is the risk that such a disembodied entity will lead courts to presume against, to underplay, or even to omit relevant circumstances, backgrounds, histories, relationships, expectations, and experiences in determining how such a person would react.\(^7\) It is possible to try to preserve some pretense of objectivity by declaring that the reasonable person standard should always take (objectively) proper account of all of the (objectively) relevant circumstances of the particular case, including elements of gender, race, migrant status, and any other relevant status.\(^9\) But all other concerns aside, this alternative preserves merely the most superficial, formalistic illusion of objectivity.

In substance, the test must recognize that reasonable judgments of offensiveness often vary with the more individualized, group-based, relational, psychological, or otherwise relevant subjective qualities of both victims and harassers. A particular verbal expression plainly need not be universally offensive to all reasonable hearers in order to come within the logic of the sexual harassment statute. As in the case of classic “fighting words,”\(^8\) the same utterance at any given time and place could have more or less adverse associations for some reasonable hearers, minimal offensiveness to other reasonable hearers, and may have even overall positive associations, in some contexts, to yet other reasonable hearers.\(^8\)

Similarly dubious is the claim to an objective test for qualified immunity of personal defendants in Section 1983 actions.\(^8\) The Supreme Court rejected what it termed a subjective test in favor of a supposedly objective test for such qualified immunity in *Harlow v. Fitzgerald*.\(^8\) Harlow thus held that “government officials performing discretionary functions generally are

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78 See Ellison, 924 F.2d at 879 (“We adopt the perspective of a reasonable woman primarily because we believe that a sex-blind reasonable person standard tends to be male-based and tends to systemically ignore the experiences of women.”). For discussion, see Elizabeth L. Schoenfelt et al., *Reasonable Person Versus Reasonable Woman: Does It Matter?*, 10 J. GENDER, SOC. POL’Y & L. 633, 669 (2002).


80 See *infra* Section IV for the discussion of Chaplinsky-style fighting words.

81 Note the subtle arguments with regard to what are most commonly, but not invariably, thought of as offensive ethnic slurs in the trademark case of Lee v. Tam, 808 F.3d 1321 (Fed. Cir. 2015), *cert. granted*, 137 S. Ct. 30 (2016).


83 *Id.; see also* Anderson v. Creighton, 483 U.S. 635, 639 (1987) (citing *Harlow*, 457 U.S. at 819 for the proposition that whether an official protected by qualified immunity may be held personally liable for allegedly unlawful action turns on the objective reasonableness of the action).
shielded from liability for civil damages insofar as their conduct does not violate clearly established statutory or constitutional rights of which a reasonable person would have known.\footnote{Harlow, 457 U.S. at 818–19; White v. Pauley, 137 S. Ct. 548, 557 (2017); Mullenix v. Luna, 136 S. Ct. 305, 308 (2015); City of San Francisco v. Sheehan, 135 S. Ct. 1765, 1774 (2015); Lisa R. Eskow & Kevin W. Cole, The Unqualified Paradoxes of Qualified Immunity, 50 BAYLOR L. REV. 869, 919 (1998) (“The touchstone for qualified immunity is Harlow’s standard of ‘objective legal reasonableness.’”).}

An objective test in this context would seem to imply that all else equal, the standard in, say, constitutionally unreasonable search cases should be the same for a specialist government legal advisor, a chief of police, an inexperienced police officer, a public utility meter reader, and a newly hired substitute public school teacher.\footnote{For public school student strip search cases involving the pursuit of limited amounts of cash, see Thomas ex rel. Thomas v. Roberts, 323 F.3d 950 (11th Cir. 2003); Jenkins ex rel. Hall v. Talladega City Bd. of Educ., 115 F.3d 821 (11th Cir. 1997). Excessive force claims may explicitly draw upon somewhat more particularization, if not also upon elements of subjectivity. \textit{See, e.g.}, Pauly v. White, 814 F.3d 1060, 1070 (10th Cir. 2016) (“We review . . . claims of excessive force under a standard of objective reasonableness, judged from the perspective of a reasonable officer on the scene.”).} For simplicity’s sake, we shall assume this to be consistently the case.\footnote{We also set aside any subjectivities involved in determining whether the law can be clearly established in the absence of any cases from particular jurisdictions or levels. For one possible approach, see \textit{Thomas}, 323 F.3d at 955 (“[O]nly Supreme Court cases, Eleventh Circuit case law, and Georgia Supreme Court case law can ‘clearly establish’ law in this circuit.”).} It is possible to read the Court’s objective standard as instead focusing on a reasonable person in light of some or all of the various relevant particular circumstances and capabilities of the particular civil rights defendant.\footnote{\textit{Harlow}, 457 U.S. at 819 (“Nevertheless, if the official pleading the defense claims extraordinary circumstances and can prove that he neither knew nor should have known of the relevant legal standard, the defense should be sustained.”).} But this would ultimately deprive the test of any pretense to distinctive objectivity.

The crucial element of subjectivity in the Court’s qualified immunity test relates to the classic “level of generality” problem,\footnote{For background discussion, see Laurence H. Tribe & Michael C. Dorf, Levels of Generality in the Definition of Rights, 57 U. CHI. L. REV. 1057 (1990); see also the classic debate between Justices Scalia and Brennan in the paternal visitation rights case of \textit{Michael H. v. Gerald D.}, 491 U.S. 110, 130 (1989).} recognized by the Court itself in the case of \textit{Anderson v. Creighton}.\footnote{483 U.S. 635, 639–40 (1987).} If the right in question is expressed as, say, a general right to due process, then a finding of a violation of that right will always preclude any defense of qualified immunity, since the
right to due process is so well established. Any government official should recognize at all times that due process violations are, of course, impermissible. But if the right in question is, at the other extreme, expressed at an unduly specific, particularized level—perhaps including named persons, days of the week, and what was consumed for breakfast—there will never be pre-existing case law sufficient to clearly establish the right in question.

The classic level of generalities problem is thus typically characterized by (arguably arbitrary) choices among degrees of abstraction or concreteness in how a claim of right is to be analyzed, or more literally, in terms of degrees of generality or specificity of the rights claim at issue. Thus while it is doubtless good for the law to establish that unreasonable searches and seizures are prohibited, this general rule does not tell us whether a strip search for missing money is unreasonable under particular circumstances. In deciding actual cases, we would need the guidance of at least somewhat more concrete, specific, contextualized formulations. Anderson recognized this need for some degree of specific contextualized formulations of the right in question.

Inevitably, the most relevant concrete, specific, contextualized formulations of a right will import one degree or another of particularized subjectivity. Thus some physical searches of a public school student may be constitutionally permissible, at least in extreme cases, as when student safety is clearly and immediately implicated and the search seems superficial and inoffensive. But we would typically want to consider some elements of the apparent subjectivities of the student, or students, to be searched. Could it matter whether the search is conducted by someone more or less well known to, or trusted by, the student being searched? Could the lack of any previous experience of being publicly searched matter? Could the degree of what one might call the maturity, sensitivity, vulnerability or the resilience of the persons being searched similarly matter? Could the students’ personal sense of privacy, or the subjective value thereof, ever matter? Or the degree of possible embarrassment, if not humiliation?

These presumably subjective considerations often factor into whether the general right against unreasonable searches has been violated and, as well, to whether the public official conducting the search—perhaps the student’s

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90 Id. at 639.
91 See id.
93 See supra note 89 and accompanying text.
94 See Anderson, 483 U.S. at 639–40 (“[I]n the light of pre-existing law the unlawfulness [of the official conduct] must be apparent.”).
95 See id.
96 See New Jersey, 469 U.S. at 341–43.
97 See id. at 338–39.
teacher—ought to have recognized the right violation at issue.  

98 Thus again, even a legal rule that purports to reject subjectivity must, on its own logic, embrace and account for what the law takes to be subjective considerations.  

99 And as it turns out, an equal and opposite form of this general incoherence is on display in some First Amendment cases, as we now briefly illustrate.  

IV. OBJECTIVE AND SUBJECTIVE TESTS IN FIRST AMENDMENT-RELATED CASES

As we have seen, the standard legal test for qualified immunity incoherently insists on what it considers objective, at the expense of what it takes to be subjective.  

101 As it turns out, the courts commit what amounts to an equal and opposite mistake in the constitutional defamation doctrine of actual malice, where a supposedly subjective test inescapably incorporates evidently more objective considerations.  

102 Where the actual malice doctrine is applicable, it requires that the defamation plaintiff show that the statements at issue were made with either subjective reckless disregard of their falsity,  

103 “a high degree of awareness of . . . probable falsity,”  

104 or actual “serious doubts”  

105 as to the truth of the assertions at issue. The actual malice test is thus thought to be subjective.  

106 In practice, though, courts in actual malice cases do not routinely attempt to establish the existence and contents of “other minds.”  

107 A libel defendant’s claim of good faith is instead typically tested on the basis of what the courts would take to be more objective considerations.  

108 Such considerations could include, say, written evidence that the libel defendant simply concocted the


99 Id. at 374–75 (2009).  

100 See infra Section IV.  

101 See supra notes 82–83 and accompanying text.  

102 See infra notes 108–12 and accompanying text.  


105 St. Amant, 390 U.S. at 733.  


claim in the absence of any grounds or evidence,\textsuperscript{109} or on the basis of readily checkable but unchecked (false) claims,\textsuperscript{110} or the “inherently improbable”\textsuperscript{111} nature of the claim, or other “obvious reasons to doubt”\textsuperscript{112} the claim in question. Crucially, what a court takes to be inherently improbable or obviously dubious need not have actually appeared doubtful to the actual libel defendant in the course of that defendant’s presumably subjective thought processes.\textsuperscript{113}

In sharp contrast, the classic Chaplinsky test for what amounts to unprotected “fighting words”\textsuperscript{114} is officially thought to be objective, as opposed to subjective.\textsuperscript{115} The seminal case of Chaplinsky v. New Hampshire explained that “the word ‘offensive’ is not to be defined in terms of what a particular addressee thinks,”\textsuperscript{116} but rather by “what men\textsuperscript{117} of common intelligence would understand would be words likely to cause an average\textsuperscript{118} addressee to fight.”\textsuperscript{119}

The basic problem here is that fighting words are typically not addressed to average persons, or to persons who are otherwise unspecified and somehow deemed ordinary. Victims of fighting words, and of hate speech more generally, are instead typically targeted specifically as members of one or more specific racial, ethnic, religious, or sexual minorities.\textsuperscript{120} The reaction to a group-specific epithet by targeted persons who do not identify at all with the verbally targeted group might take many forms, including various levels and degrees of disagreement and, certainly, understandable befuddlement. But an otherwise meaningful fighting words doctrine that explicitly ignores subjective elements plainly fails of its evident purpose.

\textsuperscript{109} See St. Amant, 390 U.S. at 732.
\textsuperscript{110} See id. at 730.
\textsuperscript{111} Id.; see also Tucker v. Fischbein, 237 F.3d 275, 284–85 (3d Cir. 2001).
\textsuperscript{112} St. Amant, 390 U.S. at 732; Murphy v. Bos. Herald, Inc., 865 N.E.2d 746, 753 (Mass. 2007).
\textsuperscript{113} Consider, classically, the psychological defense mechanisms catalogued in ANNA FREUD, THE EGO AND THE MECHANISMS OF DEFENSE (1936), as well as the rich variety of important subconscious cognitive biases discussed in DANIEL KAHNEMAN, THINKING, FAST AND SLOW (2013).
\textsuperscript{115} See id. at 573.
\textsuperscript{116} Id.
\textsuperscript{117} Our point here would not be crucially affected by reformulating the test in terms of “persons” rather than “men,” however important such distinctions are in other contexts. See supra Section III.
\textsuperscript{118} “Average,” as distinct, presumably, from the addressee in all of his or her relevant subjectivity and particularity.
\textsuperscript{119} Chaplinsky, 315 U.S. at 573.
We can appreciate the Chaplinsky Court’s unwillingness to validate a violent physical retaliation that seems baseless, utterly unforeseeable, or hypersensitive. But a supposedly objective test focusing on a disembodied, abstract, nearly cultureless, and otherwise nondescript ordinary person implies the lack of any understandable emotional motive to immediately physically react (in many cases), and thus effectively abolishes the category of fighting words, even as it claims to validate that category. If a fighting words doctrine is to make sense, it must instead take account, to one degree or another, of persons as they somehow relevantly are, including their own histories, affiliations, identities, aspirations, and presumed subjectivities.

The attempt to distinguish between objective and subjective tests also arises implicitly in the free speech context of online “true threats.” For example, in Elonis v. United States, the Court addressed, without thoroughly resolving, whether mens rea was necessary to convict the defendant of making threatening online communications. Vacating the conviction, the Court observed that “[t]he jury was instructed that the Government need prove only that a reasonable person would regard Elonis’ communications as threats, and that was error. Federal criminal liability does not turn solely on the results of an act without considering the defendant’s mental state.”

The Court in Elonis thus evidently contrasted a reasonable third-person perspective with the communicator’s own mental state. Consider, though, the reactions of any actual person being allegedly threatened. A focus on the person allegedly being threatened raises problems akin to those referred to above in the Chaplinsky “fighting words context.” Specifically, which vulnerabilities or other qualities or characteristics of the person allegedly being threatened should be considered legally relevant and how they should be taken into account?

Such inquiries bear upon the fundamental question of whether the speech at issue should be considered legally threatening or not. Here again it is undoubtedly tempting for courts to seek some distinction between objective

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121 Problems of assumed “hypersensitivity” of observers are also raised in the distinct first amendment context of Establishment Clause violations. See, e.g., Capitol Square Rev. & Advisory Bd. v. Pinette, 515 U.S. 753, 777–82 (1995) (O’Connor, J., concurring in part and concurring in the judgment) (focusing on a hypothetical reasonable observer who is appropriately informed and reflects community or collective sentiments).


123 Id.

124 See id. at 2013 (declining to decide whether a mens rea of reckless indifference—as distinct from specific intent to threaten—might suffice for liability).

125 Or presumably, the merely likely results thereof.

126 Elonis, 135 S. Ct. at 2011, 2012 (citing Morrissette v. United States, 342 U.S. 246, 252 (1952)).

127 See supra notes 94–101 and accompanying text.
and subjective tests, or some combination thereof. On the one hand, courts would want to avoid criminal or civil litigation over what we take to be plainly innocuous language that is only eccentrically, or irrationally, construed by a listener or reader to be threatening. So, there must be limits to subjectivity in this sense.

But on the other hand, as in the fighting words context, courts cannot plausibly impose a more or less abstract and disembodied person standard. What we think of as objectively threatening must inevitably involve some variable mixture of subjective elements. A credible and immediate threat to remove a wheelchair ramp, for example, might be genuinely threatening, depending in part on whether the person addressed uses a wheelchair, her realistic alternatives, and her own values and priorities regarding the use of the wheelchair ramp in question.

There is a sense in which even the particular circumstances in which some named addressee uses a wheelchair can be thought of as an objective matter. So can any particularized personal history between the relevant parties. But the idea of genuine threateningness must at some point consider more evidently subjective considerations, including degrees of the addressee’s fear, stress level, apprehension, anxiety, psychological vulnerabilities, and resilience, along with the addressee’s values, priorities, and other qualities. At some point, it becomes arbitrary, if not insensitive and unjust, to impose any detailed standardized template on the emotional responses of allegedly threatened parties. Thus again, in the true threat cases, supposedly subjective and objective considerations unavoidably refer to and mutually incorporate and define one another.

V. A Final Illustrative Context: Objective and Subjective Tests in the Deportability Legal Advice Cases

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128 See supra notes 94–101 and accompanying text.

A final perspective on the basic problem herein is available through the numerous cases addressing issues of the effective assistance of counsel in the deportation context. These cases illustrate the “peeling an onion” complications involved in attempting, vainly, to arrive at either a genuinely objective or a genuinely subjective legal test, or a combination thereof.

These cases typically require a showing of deficient performance by one’s attorney, along with a showing of prejudice. Prejudice to the client’s case must amount to at least “a reasonable probability that, but for counsel’s errors, [the defendant] would not have pleaded guilty and would have insisted on going to trial.”

The defendant must also show “that a decision to reject the plea bargain [and go to trial, thereby risking a longer sentence] would have been rational under the circumstances.”

The courts explicitly emphasize that this showing of legally sufficient causation and prejudice cannot involve a defendant’s mere declaration that had he been properly informed of the possible or likely deportation consequences of a conviction, he would have proceeded to trial. Such a “mere declaration” test is implicitly characterized by the courts as subjective, at least in the sense that the alternative test—one that considers the reasonableness of going to trial under the circumstances—is explicitly characterized as an objective test.

The rejected subjective test of prejudice involves not only a rejection of the defendant’s mere unsupported assertions as to what she would otherwise

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130 The range of illustrative contexts is indefinite. The current Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 11 governing filed legal assertions and arguments, for example, is thought to be “objective” in character. Golden Eagle Distrib. Corp. v. Burroughs Corp., 801 F.2d 1531, 1536 (9th Cir. 1986). Yet, curiously, sanctions under Rule 11 may be imposed if a paper “is filed for an improper purpose.” See Fed. R. Civ. P. 11(b)(1); Townsend v. Holman Consulting Corp., 929 F.2d 1358, 1362 (9th Cir. 1990) (en banc). It is, at the very least, imaginable that inquiring into an attorney’s purposes involves a subjective element. The intent in attempting to revise Rule 11 to reflect an objective standard may have been to thereby strengthen the rule. See David J. Weber, Note, Rule 11: Has the Objective Standard Transgressed the Adversary System?, 38 Case W. Res. L. Rev. 279, 279–83 (1987). In general, though, there seems no obvious reason why supposedly objective tests, as of mere reasonableness, must be more stringent than supposedly subjective tests, which could presumably require either massive or trivial amounts of evidence. Additionally, the Supreme Court’s claim that professional school student competency judgments are more “subjective” than typical student disciplinary investigations may itself be arbitrary. See Bd. of Curators v. Horowitz, 435 U.S. 78, 90 (1978).


132 Id.


135 United States v. Batamula, 823 F.3d 237, 240 (5th Cir. 2015) (quoting Pilla v. United States, 668 F.3d 368, 373 (6th Cir. 2012)).

136 See id.
have chosen, but also a rejection of any possible relevance of any potential unlawfulness, “arbitrariness, whimsy, caprice, ‘nullification,’ and the like” on the part of a judge or jury, and even of the “idosyncrasies” of any legal decisionmaker. A defendant’s perhaps reasonable attempt to somehow factor in, say, the possibility of jury nullification or even jury sympathy is entirely ruled out in assessing the possibility of outcome-prejudice. This of course ignores certain objectively relevant and perhaps even predictable possibilities.

Part of the problem here is that in some cases, the idiosyncrasies of a legal decisionmaker, including the politics or proclivities of a judge, can be to one degree or another predictable, and thus a part of the defendant’s objective decisional environment. And there can clearly be a difference between what a particular defendant, as she really is, clearly would have chosen, and what a hypothetical disembodied reasonable person in general might have chosen.

Inevitably, there will arise some tension between a legal test for causation or prejudice that rejects any consideration of an actor’s actual idiosyncrasy, in the name of objectivity, and, as the courts often hold, determines the prejudice issue under “the totality of the circumstances.” Inescapably, various considerations thought to involve particularities, quirks, dispositions, distinct priorities, values, idiosyncrasies, and even (known or suspected) eccentricities help to comprise the individual defendant’s actual circumstances, and thus the totality of the relevant and reasonably considered circumstances.

The totality of the circumstances in the deportability cases thus must inevitably encompass subjective as well as objective considerations. While statistical evidence may be relevant, so, certainly, may be what we normally think of as subjective or individualized evidence. And so, crucially, may a defendant’s own idiosyncratic, perhaps even inexplicably intense, desire to run the risk of a somewhat longer prison sentence in order to even slightly increase the chances of entirely avoiding deportation. Thus, there is simply no

138 See Hill, 474 U.S. at 60; Strickland, 466 U.S. at 695; Batamula, 823 F.3d at 240. It would seem, though, that not all judicial idiosyncrasies, or all possible jury nullification cases, are equally unpredictable.
139 See DeBartolo v. United States, 790 F.3d 775, 778 (7th Cir. 2015) (noting the possibility what what a defendant would have chosen might be different than what a reasonable person might have chosen).
140 See supra notes 131 and 133.
141 Batamula, 823 F.3d at 240 (quoting United States v. Kayode, 777 F.3d 719, 725 (5th Cir. 2014)).
142 See United States v. Rodriguez-Vega, 797 F.3d 781, 788 (9th Cir. 2015).
143 Id.
144 See, e.g., Padilla v. Kentucky, 559 U.S. 356, 368 (2010) (“[P]reserving the client’s right to remain in the United States may be more important to the client than any potential jail time.” (internal quotations omitted)); Kovacs v. United States, 744
objectively reasonable and uniform tradeoff between prison time and the chances of not being deported. The courts’ purportedly objective test of prejudice must inevitably take account, among other considerations, the relative intensity (however such intensity may be shown) of a particular defendant’s distinctive aversion to deportation.145

CONCLUSION

The cumulative evidence from across several important areas of the law thus suggests that attempts to distinguish between objective and subjective legal tests must inevitably result in some form of incoherence. All such efforts are in that sense futile. To one degree or another they distract from more productive judicial activities, including devoting more and better judicial attention to the appropriate elements and goals of all legal tests.

Courts should thus pay no further attention to attempting to devise or combine objective and subjective tests. Rather, courts should focus on crafting judicial tests that crucially deliver at least minimally acceptable degrees of procedural and substantive fairness to all affected parties. Beyond that fundamental constraint, courts should, within limits set by appropriate personal and institutional humility, and while respecting a sound constitutional division of labor, seek to genuinely promote the broader public well-being.

One such approach to the latter challenge begins with a properly critical focus on the historically familiar reasonable person.146 In some respects, a reasonable person test can indeed affirmatively contribute to the important constitutional and moral value of the idea of equality.147 But in other respects, the familiar reasonable person test can itself also promote and legitimize inequality.148

In the case of a victim subjected to workplace sexual harassment,149 and in fighting words and true threat cases, we can see how consciously replacing a literal reasonable man standard with a reasonable person standard might tend

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145 For further discussion of these issues, see Hernandez v. United States, 778 F.3d 1230 (11th Cir. 2015); Premo v. Moore, 562 U.S. 115 (2011); United States v. Akinsade, 686 F.3d 248 (4th Cir. 2012); United States v. Orocio, 645 F.3d 630 (3d Cir. 2011); State v. Cardenas, 61 N.E.3d 20 (Ohio Ct. App. 2016).
147 See Moran, The Reasonable Person, supra note 146, at 1233.
148 See id. at 1233, 1276.
149 See supra Section III.
to alter the adjudicator’s tacit frame of reference in deciding the case in a way that promote equality.

The problem, though, is that a formally neutral reasonable person standard may still implicitly incorporate and validate “presumptively male, white, able-bodied, literate” baseline expectations and standards. It will typically still be possible for persons who do not embody these tacit baseline presumptions to seek to displace such presumptions by arguing for their inadequacy in any particular case. But such attempts to modify the purportedly neutral or presumed standard, so as to reasonably accommodate persons whose circumstances do not match those that are legally presumed, will be met with resistance. The risks of modifying implicitly presumed standards will thus be borne by those who do not fit implicit norms. Additionally, any argument for adjustment of a presumed baseline assumption in light of one’s own relevant actual qualities may seem, ironically, “like a plea for special treatment.”

These considerations suggest that reasonableness tests, whether they are thought of, however inadequately, as either objective or subjective, should, all else equal, aim at some appropriate promotion of equality values. After all, equality, at least in some sense, is written into the Constitution, and into the broader legal system itself as a foundational value.

There are important limitations, however, to designing legal tests with an eye toward promoting equality, as opposed to fruitlessly pursuing some coherent parsing of supposedly objective or subjective considerations. At a general policy-oriented level, the idea of equality has by now become massively indeterminate and widely varied in its basic concerns and requirements. The idea of equality, in itself, clearly tells us little. Much of the value of many forms of equality may be instrumental in, or a means of, promoting other values.

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150 Moran, The Reasonable Person, supra note 146, at 1276.
151 See id.
152 See id.
153 See id.
154 See id.
155 Id. For an alternatively focused emphasis on the goal of equality in the context of the negligence law reasonableness standard, see Avihay Dorfman, Reasonable Care: Equality as Objectivity, 31 L. & PHIL. 369 (2012).
156 See U.S. CONST. amend. XIV (prohibiting states from denying “equal protection of the laws”).
157 See generally RONALD DWORKIN, SOVEREIGN VIRTUE: THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF EQUALITY (2002) (arguing that the government should aim at a form of material equality).
Some particular forms of equality, however, may promote what has been called the value of community, solidarity, or fraternity. The idea of promoting community has, for many, an intuitive and quite understandable appeal. We of course cannot undertake a broad defense of the legal and moral value of community here. But at the very least, we can point out that continued judicial obsession with pursuing objectivity or subjectivity offers no payoff. Rather than futilely pursuing the crafting of supposedly objective or subjective legal tests, or focusing unduly on the idea of equality itself, courts should instead seek, again within the constraints of fairness, to appropriately promote forms of basic community that are themselves linked to some forms of equality.

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