

The Objectivity of Subjective Truths

Professor Semir Zeki
University College London

Abstract

In his book on colour vision, the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer wrote that “*A better understanding and a firmer conviction of the wholly subjective nature of colour is a very good introduction to the Kantian doctrine of the likewise subjective, intellectual forms of all knowledge*”. The theme of my lecture will be that the only truths we can be certain of are subjective truths, be they of colour, or of love or beauty. I will illustrate this by describing how the brain constructs constant colours through which we stabilize our world and thus obtain knowledge about it. I will continue by describing other subjective truths which we can be sure of – such as the experience of beauty and desire – and the strong, objectively verifiable, relationship that exists between the declared intensity of such subjective experiences and the intensity of activity in specific brain areas that correlates with these subjective states. Finally, given that the experience of beauty derived from sensory sources as well as from highly cognitive ones such as mathematics, correlates with activity in the same part of the brain, I will address the question of the more general use of beauty for gaining knowledge.