

Engineering Perspective

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Are cables audible? Do special finishes on loudspeakers focus the sound? Does ABC improve XYZ?

These are questions typical of the ongoing debate of objectivism versus subjectivism. The objectivists contend that “if you can’t measure it, then you can’t hear it”, while the subjectivists contend that “if you can’t measure what I am hearing, then you don’t know how to measure it yet!”

It may be helpful to present the engineer’s view of the subject.

An old joke about engineers (funny, there seem to be a lot of those...) runs thus: an optimist thinks the glass is half-full, a pessimist thinks the glass is half-empty, and an engineer thinks the glass is too big!

Very similar to these lines is the engineer’s take on the objective versus subjective debate. The bottom line is not whether a difference is perceivable – our senses are so incredible that assertions of an inability to perceive are constantly being revised – the real bottom line is one of cost versus performance.

Is the improvement in sound made by a special pair of RCA cables worth \$1, \$10, \$100, or even \$1,000 to a given person? The resources of the person will play a big role in this, so it is *not* a constant value. Consider the following thought experiment: an audiophile has \$10,000 to spend and a blank slate for an audio system. What would he spend the available resources on in order to create the most pleasing system? The user’s tastes also play a big role in this, so it is still not a simple question, however it is a much more *useful* question than “does ABC improve XYZ”.

The reason many individuals do spend large amounts of money on cables, etc. is that they do *not* have a blank slate, as in the above thought experiment. They have an expensive system that they are mostly content with, but want to give it a little extra *something*. So instead of attacking what would normally be the top choices: loudspeakers, amplifiers, etc., they elect to attack that which leaves the existing system intact: cables, equipment feet, speaker treatments, etc.

When deciding whether to make an expensive audio purchase, it may be better to consider the above and decide if you would purchase it as part of your “blank slate” system. If not, then why not save the money toward getting that system someday?