

Distributed Truth-Telling

A Model for Moral Revolution and Epistemic Justice in Australia

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This article provides a philosophical response to the need for truth-telling about colonial history, focussing on the Australian context. The response consists in inviting philosophers and the public to engage in social-justice practices specified by a model called Distributed Truth-Telling (DTT), which integrates the historiography of injustices affecting Indigenous peoples with insights from social philosophy and cultural evolution theory. By contrast to official and large-scale truth commissions, distributed truth-telling is a set of non-elitist practices that weave three components: first, multisite, multiformat, and multiscale inquiries into injustices; second, remedial imaginings and reasoning about moral repair and reconciliated futures; and finally, emotions suitable for motivating agents to cooperatively plan and implement moral revolutions. Distributed truth-telling can entrench virtuous feedback loops that contribute to moral revolutions. However, vicious feedback loops associated with collective denial and biases can impair distributed truth-telling and thwart moral revolutions.

Keywords: truth-telling, moral revolution and repair, decolonization in Australia, historical and epistemic injustice, rationality and biases, cultural learning and entrenchment

1. Introduction

Settler-colonial policies have inflicted injustices on Indigenous peoples across the world. In Australia, Indigenous communities have called for truth-telling about the legacies of this colonial history in the spirit of reconciliation, most recently in the Uluru Statement from the Heart (Referendum Council 2017). In response to this invitation, we propose a model called Distributed Truth-Telling (DTT).¹ The central hypothesis of DTT is that a set of practices governing inquiries into injustices, which we refer to as *distributed truth-telling*, can make significant contributions to meeting the aspirations of Indigenous and non-Indigenous truth-tellers by triggering moral revolutions in Kwame Anthony Appiah's (2010) sense. To contextualize the model, we examine in §2 the need for truth-telling and the concept of moral revolution. We introduce the key concepts of DTT in §3; and we contrast the distributed practices invited by DTT with official processes of truth-telling in §4. We present arguments suggesting that distributed truth-telling can entrench virtuous feedback loops required for moral revolutions in §5. Finally, our enquiry closes with thoughts and questions for further research in §6.

2. The Need for Truth-Telling and Moral Revolution

In Australia, the duplicitousness of public discourse about violence against Indigenous people (for example, massacres; see Ryan, Debenham, *et al.* 2017) and the tampering of colonial archives (Elkins 2022) are examples of a phenomenon sometimes termed 'white ignorance'. In Charles Mills' (2007, 2015) account, *white ignorance* denotes epistemic malpractice causally linked to white dominance; it is 'an ignorance among whites—an absence of belief, a false belief, a set of false beliefs, a pervasively deforming outlook—that was not contingent but causally linked to their whiteness' (Mills 2015: 217). 'Truth-telling' has been used to denote the communicative acts and practices required to break this sort of ignorance (Govier 2006: ch. 1; Palmer and Watene 2018; Reynolds 2021), as well as a form of moral reparation (Walker 2010).

¹ In the article, 'Distributed Truth-Telling' and 'DTT' denote the model and 'distributed truth-telling' the set of practices described by the model.

The best-known construct used for identifying Australian white ignorance is W. E. H. Stanner's concept of the Great Australian Silence—the exclusion of Indigenous peoples and examinations of colonial violence from published general histories of Australia (Stanner 1979: 198–248). Stanner described this exclusion as 'a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale' (Stanner 1979: 213–14). Some historians have influentially challenged this collective denial (Reynolds 1981, 2000; Ryan 1981); but the Great Australian Silence lingers in several domains and has rarely been discussed in the professional circles of Australian philosophy.

One domain that remains tainted by denial is the law (Moreton-Robinson 2015; Reynolds 2021). *Terra nullius*—'land belonging to no-one'—was the doctrine implicitly relied upon by the British Crown to acquire sovereignty over the Australian landmass. The doctrine presupposed the lie that Indigenous people had no settled laws or social systems, thereby facilitating their dispossession, 'dispersal',² and subjugation. Because Indigenous sovereignty at 1788 remains unrecognized, as evidenced by the absence of treaties, the lie of *terra nullius* remains a core principle of Australian law.

Another domain tainted by denial is the memorialization of war. More Australians died in the colonial frontier wars than in the First World War, yet this domestic war is not commemorated in the National War Memorial, described by a senior politician as a the 'soul' of the nation (Reynolds 2021: 205–7). The reluctance to do so can be understood as an echo of the History Wars (Macintyre and Clark 2004), the contestation about the consequences of colonization for First Australians.

Meanwhile, Indigenous communities have called for a radical overhaul of research methodologies in societies affected by white ignorance (Smith 1999). Indigenous philosophies have invited philosophers to pay greater attention to place-based ethical engagements (Graham 2008; Grix and Watene 2022; Watene 2024). Such place-based philosophies are echoed by recent efforts to decolonize and diversify philosophy (Mills 1997; Mitova 2020; McAlister and Hochman 2023; Wilson 2023). We will use *Indigenist*

² 'Dispersal' was a euphemism commonly deployed on the Australian frontier. To 'disperse' gatherings of Aboriginal people meant to shoot to kill them (Reynolds 2021: 182–83).

research to denote research that is developed with, by, and for Indigenous communities (Rigney 1999; Foley 2003; Atalay 2012) and promotes decolonized collaborations (Pollard 2024; Watene 2024). To understand the cultural entrenchment of white ignorance in Australia from an Indigenist standpoint, Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2015) has introduced the concept of *patriarchal white sovereignty*, which refers to ‘a regime of power that derives from the illegal act of possession ... that is evident in everyday cultural practices and spaces’ (Moreton-Robinson 2015: 34–35). Martin Nakata (2007) has also made important contributions to theorising white ignorance by exposing how Western academic disciplines—such as anthropology—have produced dehumanizing representations of Torres Strait Islanders.

Non-Indigenous philosophers have rarely dialogued with the Indigenist tradition. Indigenous critiques have attracted little discussion in prominent journals of academic philosophy, such as the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*.³ In their contribution to a recent volume on the history of philosophy in Australia and New Zealand, Catriona Mackenzie lamented that ‘Indigenous voices are quite absent in general from Australian philosophy’ (Mackenzie 2014: 629). Philosophers ought to reflect on the reasons for, and implications of, this absence. This reflection is also called for by a growing body of research documenting the complicity of Western philosophy with ways of thinking and institutions that have racialized Indigenous and other peoples of colour (Mills 1997; Smith 1999; Elkins 2022; Lu-Adler 2023; Wilson 2023).

Inspired by advances in Indigenist philosophy, the working hypothesis that motivates the present article is that practices of collective denial and white ignorance, such as the Great Australian Silence, preclude what we call ‘moral revolution’. The concept of *moral revolution* was introduced by Appiah (2010) as a counterpart to Thomas Kuhn’s concept of scientific revolution. In Appiah’s words:

³ To our knowledge, despite the growing interest in diversifying and decolonizing epistemology, engagement with Indigenous issues in the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* has been limited to articles in a 1990 issue (for example Bigelow, Pargetter, and Young 1990) and further articles in a 2000 issue (Iverson 2000; for example Sparrow 2000).

Morality ... is, at its heart, about what we do. So, since a revolution is a large change in a short time, a moral revolution has to involve a rapid transformation in moral behavior, not just in moral sentiments.

Nevertheless, at the end of the moral revolution, as at the end of a scientific revolution, things look new. Looking back, even over a single generation, people ask, 'What were we thinking? How did we do that for all those years?' (Appiah 2010: xi)

Appiah (2010) examines three moral revolutions that led to the end of dueling in England, foot-binding in China, and the Atlantic slave trade. In the next sections, we focus on the problem of moral revolutions in Australia. We assume that a *moral revolution* occurs when two conditions obtain. First, new moral behaviours and experiences, reflecting rational moral arguments and fitting emotions formulated in response to injustices, become culturally entrenched. Second, as a consequence of this cultural entrenchment, the injustices that triggered the revolution are remediated. Truth-telling may well be an effective instrument for moral revolution in Australia because it can trigger dramatic changes in moral attitudes. But how exactly should 'truth-telling' be understood given the multiple ways in which the term is interpreted (for example, honest disclosure, concerted official process, moral reparation)? We propose DTT to address this question.

3. The Distributed Truth-Telling Model

DTT responds to the problem of failed cultural entrenchment of rational moral arguments, evidenced by insufficient change in moral behaviour and therefore failed moral revolutions (Appiah 2010: xi–xix). In Australia, that problem is exemplified by the limitations of official truth-telling inquiries, which have collated evidence about injustices and articulated moral arguments for institutional change. Commentators have lamented that official inquiries have not resulted in substantive change, emphasizing the failed cultural entrenchment of the moral arguments they have advanced. For example, writing of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1989–1991) and the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children From their Families (1995–1997), commentators noted that

political intransigence ensured that Australia's truth-telling processes did not produce significant transformation in terms of reparations, legal reforms, or in advancing towards genuine recognition of Indigenous sovereignty ... These failures are important reminders of the difficulty of securing justice and emancipation through processes like commissions. (Maddison, Hurst, and Thomas 2023: 215)

This concern about the ineffectiveness of Australia's truth-telling processes echoes critiques of official truth-and-reconciliation models by several philosophers (Walker 2010; Coulthard 2014; Murdock 2018). To address these worries, DTT identifies official truth-telling proceedings as mere nodes in much larger networks of practices that contribute to or inhibit truth-telling. DTT posits that an individual or a group can contribute to either a *virtuous feedback loop* (top-right components in Figure 1), which uses socially distributed forms of truth-telling to enact moral revolution, or a *vicious feedback loop* (shaded components in Figure 1), in which the cultural entrenchment of phenomena associated with white ignorance inhibits moral revolution.

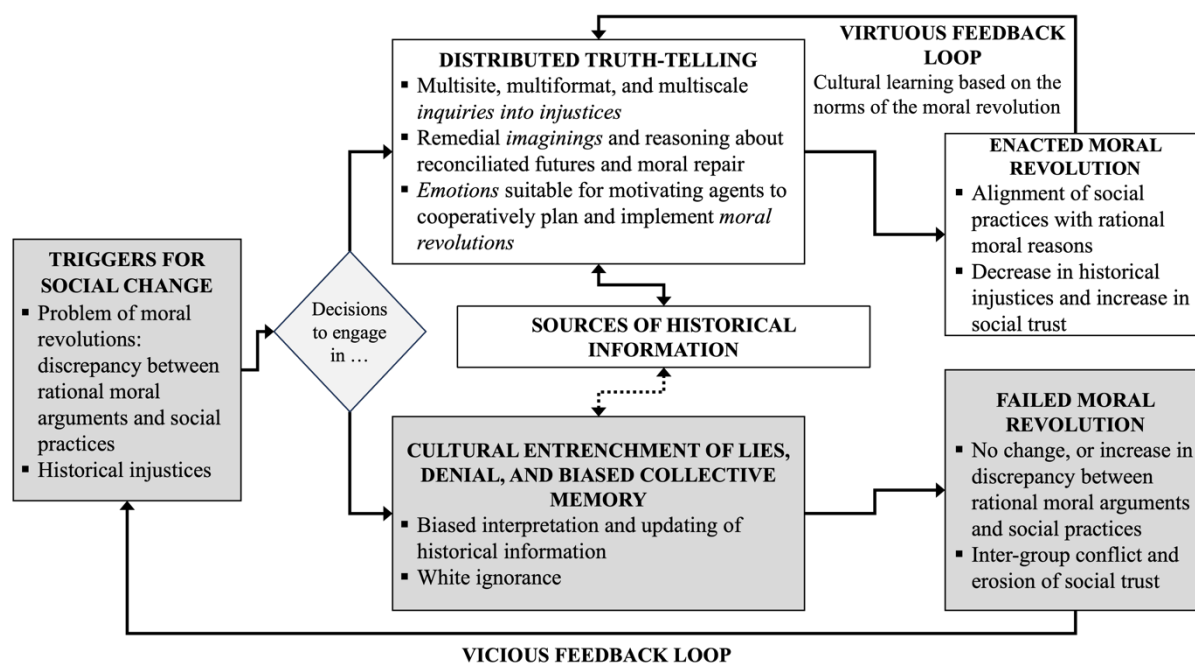


Figure 1: the Distributed Truth-Telling Model (DTT)

DTT's central hypothesis—represented by the virtuous feedback loop in Figure 1—is that the social distribution of truth-telling practices can contribute to culturally entrenching rational moral arguments into a community, thereby facilitating moral revolutions (that is, the alignment of social practices with those arguments). The

cultural entrenchment of a new behaviour of type *B* refers to the fact that *B*-type behaviours are transmitted across generations through cultural learning (Sterelny 2012) and social scaffolding (Wimsatt and Griesemer 2007; Haslanger 2019). Agents contribute to a vicious feedback loop when their practices promote the cultural entrenchment of lies, denial, biased collective memory, and white ignorance (see shaded components of the vicious loop). The practices associated with white ignorance may lead to harms such as inter-group conflicts and the erosion of social trust.

In the model, *distributed truth-telling* refers to non-elitist practices encompassing three components, which we discuss next.

3.1 Social Distribution

The first is a reason for using the qualifier *distributed*: these practices include multisite, multiformat, and multiscale inquiries into injustices.⁴ *Multisite* means individual and collective inquiries can occur in places ranging from domestic, educational, and online spaces to the workplace or the street, through to legal, governmental, or academic institutions. *Multiformat* means inquiries can occur through diverse media: depictions, works of art and memorialization, and the performance of rituals. *Multiscale* means inquiries can occur at different scales, such as a conversation between peers, a community meeting, a regionally broadcast event, a national truth commission, or an international movement. DTT's tripartite conceptualization, while perhaps appearing too disparate at first sight, is supported by a normative analysis of historical cases of Indigenous emancipation.

DTT's conceptualization of social distribution is supported by the capacity of contemporary inquirers to track the cultural propagation of truth-telling events across different sites, formats, and scales. For example, at the scale of relations between sovereign powers, no treaties were negotiated—neither at colonisation in 1788 nor any time thereafter—between Indigenous people in Australia and the British Crown. This is the case despite the fact that imperial powers had experience negotiating treaties with Indigenous groups in other contexts—for example, in North America—during that

⁴ Another reason for using 'distributed' is that some arguments in support of DTT derive from research on distributed and '4E' cognition (Kirsh 2006; Sutton 2006; Menary 2010).

period (Reynolds 2021: 112–22). Historiographical evidence makes it possible to retrace the multisite and multiformat propagation of distributed truth-telling about the absence of treaty in Australia. Years of truth-telling practices between Indigenous communities and the Australian Government have resulted in testaments to Indigenous sovereignty and resilience, including the 1963 Yirrkala bark petitions, the 1972 Aboriginal Tent Embassy, and the 1988 Barunga and 2017 Uluru Statements. These works are costly acts of signalling exemplifying cooperation across cultures and languages.⁵ Evidence of the popularization of multisite and multiformat truth-telling about treaty is found in the cultural entrenchment of works of art calling for treaty, such as the 1991 protest song *Treaty* by Yothu Yindi. The Yirrkala bark petitions, the Aboriginal Tent Embassy, the Barunga and Uluru Statements, and the song *Treaty* are multiformat works, which braid ceremonial, legal, political, and artistic performances and meanings.

3.2 Remedial Imaginings

The second component of distributed truth-telling is *remedial imaginings* and counterfactual reasoning about moral repair (Walker 2006, 2010) and reconciled futures. DTT integrates Walker's (2006) insight that responses to political wrongdoings ought not be limited to legal punishment (2006: 8–10) because a diversity of social actions can deliver moral repair for victims of injustice—for example, being merciful, acknowledging responsibility, exhibiting remorse, and performing reparative acts such as giving victims a right to testimony (2006: 11, 23–24). Distributed truth-telling includes imagining collective futures where injustices have been remediated in ways that suit the victims' context-specific needs. Imagination allows truth-tellers to overcome routine social expectations and conceive of culturally innovative paths to moral revolution (Appiah 2010).

Distributed truth-telling is thus a creative laboratory for new cultural imaginings that break the impasses of structural injustice and white ignorance. In Australia, Indigenous people have identified imaginings about reconciled futures as one of the objectives of truth-telling. The Uluru Statement, for example, calls for the 'coming together after a

⁵ On the role of signalling in truth-telling rituals, see §5.2.

struggle' (Referendum Council 2017). A recent survey of community truth-telling emphasized the future-oriented nature of truth-telling:

Reconciliation is understood by interviewees as being about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous communities creating new relationships through truth-telling, in recognition that often these relationships have never existed before. (Barolsky, Berger, and Close 2023: 15)

3.3 Fitting Emotions

The third component is the experiencing of *fitting emotions* motivating morally revolutionary action (Appiah 2010). Distributed truth-telling emerges from normative expectations (Walker 2006: 27): it rests on the communication of value judgments and emotions about past, present, and future. It involves reasoning about past harmful actions and may therefore include, or respond to, negative emotions such as hatred (Minow 2002) and anger-cum-resentment (Walker 2006: 18–19, 28–30). But the range of emotions distributed truth-telling evokes is not limited to negative emotions for two reasons. First, the commitment of moral revolutionaries depends on their *hopefulness* for a better future (Walker 2006: ch. 2, 2010: 532). Second, the dedication to achieving the joint acknowledgement of historical facts and commitments towards remediated futures can evoke positive emotions associated with trust (Jones 1996; Govier 2006: ch. 10; Walker 2006).

4. The Contrast Between Grassroots Distributed Truth-Telling and Official Truth Commissions

What social practices—for example, official truth commissions or grassroots initiatives—should we count as exemplary cases of distributed truth-telling? In some societies with a history of inter-group violence and racialization (for example, South Africa and Canada), the traditional approach for truth-telling has been official truth and reconciliation commissions (Govier 2006; Walker 2006, 2010). Correspondingly, the literature on reconciliation and reparation foregrounds what Walker describes as 'concerted' or 'orchestrated' truth telling (Walker 2010: 528), which is typically coordinated through formal, state-linked official processes. But one objection to this

focus on official processes stems from asymmetrical power relations (Coulthard 2014; Murdock 2018). Critiquing the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission, for example, Glen Coulthard identified as one of its shortcomings that 'Indigenous subjects are the primary object of repair, not the colonial relationship' (Coulthard 2014: 127). To Coulthard, if a truth-telling and reconciliation process pacifies the anti-colonial anger and resentment of Indigenous people while failing to deliver meaningful reparations, then that process has gone awry. As he writes:

what is treated in the Canadian discourse of reconciliation as an unhealthy and debilitating incapacity to forgive and move on is actually a sign of our *critical consciousness*, of our sense of justice and injustice, and of our awareness of and unwillingness to reconcile ourselves with a structural and symbolic violence that is still very much present in our lives. (Coulthard 2014: 126)

Coulthard's objection is complemented by Jennifer Lackey's (2022) analysis of the need for an epistemic dimension to the discussion on reparations. Lackey argues that 'victims of gross violations and injustices not only have the right to know what happened, but also the right to be known—to be a giver of knowledge to others about their own experiences' (2022: 56). Sensitive to Coulthard's and Lackey's concerns, DDT hypothesizes that socially distributed forms of truth-telling are more likely to deliver moral revolutions involving epistemic reparations than are official processes intertwined with institutions implicated in the oppression of Indigenous peoples.

With that said, DDT remains compatible with the thought that official mechanisms like Royal Commissions and other truth and reconciliation processes can produce virtuous feedback loops leading to moral revolutions. DTT's contribution is to suggest that such official processes ought not be viewed as the sole, nor primary, method for truth-telling. Rather, official processes are salient nodes in a larger network of cultural transmission. It is the larger network which makes maximal use of the practices and tools normatively required by distributed truth-telling.

A survey of grassroots truth-telling initiatives across Australia supports this point when it declares: 'Another crucial principle for effective truth-telling is support for the generative capacity of diversity and multiplicity, rather than the imposition of rigid models of truth-telling' (Barolsky, Berger, and Close 2023: 133). Our conceptualization

of distributed truth-telling side-steps cynicism about official truth-telling processes by engaging, to quote Duncan Ivison, 'constellations of normative orders that overlap and intersect in complex ways both above and below the state' (Ivison 2016: 15) Thus, while it is reasonable to argue, as Minow (1998) does, that official truth commissions can have significant advantages over individual prosecutions after human rights violations, DTT highlights a wider set of practices that can circumvent the issues raised by Coulthard's critique of the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Take the example of the commemorations of the 1966 Wave Hill Walk-Off. The Walk-Off was a significant event in the history of struggles for Indigenous land rights and better working conditions in the pastoral industry (Ward 2016). Two hundred Indigenous stockmen and women commenced a *multisite* strike against a British-owned pastoral company that lasted seven years and galvanised widespread support for Indigenous justice issues expressed through multiple formats, such as protests in other cities and news media reports. Its influence propagated from the regional scale of the strike to the scale of state or territory. These efforts led to collective changes in beliefs, emotions, and behaviours that constituted a moral revolution, with the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* (Cth) being evidence of that revolution's occurrence.⁶ As a testament to its status as a multisite and multiformat truth-telling process, the Walk-Off has been commemorated since the 1980s via an annual Freedom Day Festival on Gurindji country; and it is celebrated by works of art such as the 1991 protest song *From Little Things Big Things Grow* by Australian artists Paul Kelly & The Messengers and a mural painting in Darwin. At the 50th anniversary of the event, over 5000 Indigenous and non-Indigenous people gathered on Gurindji Country (Barolsky, Berger,

⁶ The Act can be interpreted as evidence of a moral revolution in the sense specified in §2 despite its scope being limited to the Northern Territory. First, the changes in collective mindset leading to the Act and its social consequences evidence the entrenchment of new behaviours that accord with rational arguments about repairing Indigenous dispossession (first criterion). Second, such new behaviours contribute to the remediation of past injustices (second criterion). It is now unlikely that the Act could be repealed because it established Land Councils and gave Traditional Owners strong protections (including veto power) vis-à-vis proposed developments on their land.

and Close 2023: 61). The commemorations involve re-enactments of the walk itself, as well as storytelling and artmaking about the event and its legacy—more evidence of the multiformat nature of the commemorations.

Another example is the commemoration of the Coniston Massacre. In 1928, Warlpiri, Anmatyerre and Kaytetye people were massacred by a party led by Constable George Murray in the last major police reprisal killing against Indigenous people in Australia (Bradley 2019). A Board of Enquiry established to investigate employed biased evidentiary procedures to conclude that the police-led killings had been justified in self-defence—a case of collective denial (Wilson and O'Brien 2004: 36–40). Historians working with Indigenous oral tradition later helped correct the historiographical record (Read and Read 1991). In 2003, on the 75th anniversary of the massacre, the first commemoration ceremony was held. The family representatives of the perpetrator George Murray 'spoke sorrowfully of profound regret and they apologised wholeheartedly [to representatives of the victims]. The apology was accepted' (Warden 2003: v). The police also expressed their regret at what had occurred. Following this ceremony, multiformat, and multisite commemorations occurred: a memorial plaque was erected at the site of the killing, Aboriginal art was created about the topic, a documentary-drama was produced, and a book was written for a non-specialist audience (Bradley 2019). The Coniston commemoration is a moral revolution in our sense, because it has entrenched new moral behaviours and fitting emotions amongst the relevant parties, from the descendants of victims and perpetrators, to the institution of the police. The commemoration confirms it is unlikely that a police-led reprisal massacre of Indigenous people in the area could happen again.

5. Distributed Truth-Telling for Moral Revolution

The commemoration of the Coniston Massacre may be psychologically restorative for the implicated parties. But, in the spirit of Coulthard's (2014) critical consciousness, it might be wondered whether such initiatives are merely tokenistic and therefore unlikely to entrench moral revolutions. To address this concern, we argue that distributed truth-telling does contribute to moral revolutions because it can overcome three barriers to moral revolutions.

5.1 Overcoming the Untrusted-Elite Barrier

Call *untrusted-elite barrier* a situation where the rationale for moral revolution is pressed by members of an untrusted elite, and the trust deficit hinders the cultural entrenchment of the rationale. In addition to elitism-related issues faced by official truth commissions where these commissions might seem ‘marginal, unimportant, or unrepresentative’ (Minow 1998: 325), settler-colonial history provides ample evidence of untrusted-elite barriers in the subjugation of Indigenous knowledges and priorities to non-Indigenous and Western perspectives (Smith 1999: 1; Nakata 2007; Moreton-Robinson 2015; Pollard 2024). These perspectives were culturally entrenched and propagated by academic, political, and social elites perceived as untrustworthy by Indigenous people, leading to untrusted-elite barriers.

DTT overcomes untrusted-elite barriers by foregrounding the voices and practices of communities that have been epistemically marginalized and racialized by academic elites. Foregrounding epistemically marginalized perspectives offers an alternative to philosophical views combining methodological elitism with epistemological individualism. This approach will help achieve Mills’ stated objective of ‘reformulating an epistemology that will give us genuine knowledge’ (Mills 2007: 16). According to DTT, elitist and individualistic approaches are inadequate for identifying the cognitive tools relevant for moral revolutions. The emphasis on multisite and multisite practices in DTT is aimed at not privileging the academy—and other elite domains—as the sole or primary provenance of truth-telling. DTT involves truth-telling led by networks broader than the networks of scholars working with methodologies that some Indigenist scholars have found problematic (Smith 1999; Nakata 2007; Pollard 2024).

This broadening of truth-telling networks requires abandoning psychologically individualistic approaches to human cognition, which explain cognition by focusing on processes located inside the skull of individuals in abstraction from social factors and cultural transmission (see, for example, Fodor 1980). Psychological individualism has faced growing critique because it neglects the phenomena that need to be analysed for understanding processes of social cognition such as distributed truth-telling. These phenomena include the role of social interactions and cultural scaffolding in shaping collective normative expectations (Walker 2006: 33–38; Wimsatt and Griesemer 2007; Bullot 2020; Satne 2021), the importance of coordination problems in human collective

agency (Chwe 2001; Walker 2010: 535–36), the challenge of epistemic injustices and debiasing (Fricker 2007; Levy 2021), and the significance of place-based ethics (Graham 2008; Coulthard 2014; Grix and Watene 2022). DTT is aligned with such critiques of individualism because it focuses on matters of cultural entrenchment, coordination, debiasing, and place-based ethics.

5.2 Overcoming the Coordination Barrier

Another barrier is the *coordination barrier*: a situation where agents agree on the rationale for revolution but fail to entrench it because they lack common knowledge of their evaluations, commitments, and intentions. Like other forms of distributed and transactive cognition (Wegner 1995; Chwe 2001; Kirsh 2006), distributed truth-telling faces multiple coordination problems. For example, each moral revolutionary needs to know of each other that they know about the rationale for revolution and intend to contribute to it. The influence of collective denial in a society can promote vicious feedback loops that prevent the establishment of common knowledge, posing coordination problems for moral revolutionaries.

For Mills, collective white denial contributes to vicious feedback loops that hinder common knowledge of white ignorance because '[w]hites will cite other whites in a closed circuit of epistemic authority that reproduces white delusions' (Mills 2007: 34). The 'white' in 'white ignorance' can refer to nonwhite people because white ignorance 'will often be shared by nonwhites to a greater or lesser extent because of the power relations and patterns of ideological hegemony involved' (Mills 2007: 22). Likewise, Walker explicitly links collective denial to a network of epistemic malpractice that can be understood as promoting vicious feedback loops and preventing common knowledge: 'Not only denial ... but fabrication, distortion, and epistemic diversion suffice to pre-empt certain questions, to make certain inferences unavailable, or to render certain truths incredible and those who tell them untrustworthy' (Walker 2010: 538).

Distributed truth-telling is well-suited to instigating virtuous feedback loops that address the challenges to coordination and common knowledge described by Mills (2007) and Walker (2010). Consider the example of collective denial about frontier massacres (Ryan 1981; Ryan, Debenham, *et al.* 2017). Such denial persists insofar as the relevant community lacks common knowledge about the process of collective denial itself (Zerubavel 2006). However, if there is growing coordination in understanding

frontier massacres, such as the Coniston Massacre, and growing understanding of the collective act of denial itself, then maintaining the *status quo* of denial becomes unviable. Specifically, distributed truth-telling about a massacre can contribute to such coordinated understanding by triggering cascading follow-up practices of truth-telling performed at multiple sites and scales and aimed at disrupting silencing processes. This phenomenon of cascading truth-telling can also be observed in the context of official truth commissions because confessions by perpetrators revealing new information can prompt further confessions from other perpetrators (Minow 1998: 325). However, DTT suggests that the effectiveness of such epistemic cascades is greater when truth-telling and common knowledge are culturally entrenched by means of broad social distribution.

Ritual is one of the social resources that can be used by distributed truth-telling to entrench common knowledge. Reasoning (Chwe 2001) and the synchronization of actions (Wiltermuth and Heath 2009) during rituals provide a social structure fostering cooperation and common knowledge. For example, both the Gurindji Freedom Day Festival, which celebrates the Wave Hill Walk-Off, and the commemoration of the Coniston Massacre, involve rituals in which participants, in addition to inquiring into past injustices, develop knowledge that others know they participate in truth-telling rituals (Chwe 2001). Rituals of that sort generate virtuous feedback loops by propagating multisite, multiformat, and multiscale acts of truth-telling associated with the cultural entrenchment of moral arguments. This process has the potential to undermine the unjust *status quo* and enact a moral revolution at a scale suitable to ending collective denial. As a result, the expanding virtuous feedback loop of common knowledge makes the persistence of collective denial—and denial-enabling emotions such as anger and shame—less likely. By contrast, when the epistemic environment is polluted by biased and deceitful processing of historical information (see Figure 1), then it becomes more difficult to establish the virtuous circle of expanding common knowledge.

Common knowledge obtained through distributed truth-telling is also implicated in the scaffolding of trust-related attitudes and affective states. When trust is reciprocal, *A* trusts *B* and *vice versa*. According to models of trust as mutually encapsulated interest (Hardin 2002), this may be because *A* believes that *A*'s interest is encapsulated in *B*'s

interest, and *vice versa*. Establishing trust has been identified as essential to the success of truth-telling initiatives of moral repair (Minow 1998; Govier 2006; Walker 2006, 2010). Distributed truth-telling can nurture trust by establishing reliable communication about, and common knowledge of, the reciprocal encapsulation of interests. Even if one rejects a conceptualization of trust based on encapsulated interests in favour of a model based on emotions (Jones 1996), the remedial imaginings and reasoning about reconciliated futures implicated in distributed truth-telling can strengthen emotions that support trust, as the commemoration of the Coniston Massacre illustrates.

Finally, the costly signals communicated during rituals and significant meetings can be used to authenticate other people's commitments to truth-telling and assess their trustworthiness—see Bacharach and Gambetta (2001) and Sterelny (2012: 109–13). Costly signals communicated during truth-telling include incriminating testimony in front of witnesses (for example, recorded admissions and confessions of past crimes), emotional intensities difficult to fake (for example, expressions of grief, remorse and compassion, as in the Coniston commemoration), and intensely effortful actions (for example, organizing an annual Freedom Day Festival).

5.3 Overcoming the Bias Barrier

Moral revolutions can be precluded by bias. Call *bias barrier* the situation where a culturally entrenched hierarchy relying on biased narratives about a group prevents moral revolution (Mills 2007, 2015). For example, entrenched racialization of Indigenous Australians has prevented moral revolutions that would have recognised and entrenched the sovereignty of Indigenous Australians (Moreton-Robinson 2015). As illustrated by the commemorations of the Wave Hill Walk-Off and the Coniston Massacre (§4), distributed truth-telling can coordinate social resources (§5.2) that erode the cultural influence of biased narratives justifying racial hierarchies (§2, §5.1). DTT posits that this erosion can generate virtuous feedback loops leading to moral revolutions (Figure 1).

It may be objected that there is no necessary link between distributed truth-telling and debiasing thinking about Indigenous struggles because a white supremacist group could similarly engage in distributed truth-telling about historical experiences of 'white dispossession' and loss of racial hierarchies it regards as traumatic for its community. If

the concept of distributed truth-telling is understood as neutral with respect to substantive views of moral goods, then it can seemingly be instrumentalized both for moral revolutions that undermine racial hierarchies and immoral revolutions that consolidate such hierarchies.

DTT can overcome this objection because our conceptualization of distributed truth-telling depends on substantive moral requirements that are not met by white supremacist doctrines. *Substantivism* in DTT lies in the requirement that truth-tellers justify their practice with unbiased moral and political reasons (Scanlon 1998; Schroeter and Schroeter 2018) and minimize the risk that their discourse violates basic norms of epistemic rationality—for example, truth-related norms (see Mills 2007: 14–15; Walker 2010: 535, 539).⁷ Satisfying these requirements of epistemic rationality is needed to fulfill one of the aims of distributed truth-telling, which is to make moral and epistemic reparations to those who have suffered epistemic wrongs ‘by being rendered invisible, vilified or demonized, or systematically distorted’ (Lackey 2022: 56). The requirements of rationality orient moral revolutionaries towards breaking practices of collective denial to achieve a truer understanding of social others, one that fulfils their ‘right to be known’ which requires victim-survivors ‘to be seen and heard—to have their stories be given proper uptake’ (Lackey 2022: 61). Distributed truth-telling is oriented towards remediating *injustice*, but truth-tellers’ understanding of injustice is contingent on the rationality of the moral arguments mustered to demonstrate the existence of injustice.

DTT is therefore built on the premise that the rationale for each moral revolution satisfies significant requirements of rationality, and that attitudes and discourses

⁷ Some of the norms of epistemic rationality that can be relevant to truth-tellers include deploying critical thinking and epistemic vigilance (Sperber, Clément, *et al.* 2010), testing and justifying beliefs and claims by reference to evidence (Levy 2021), pursuing inter-belief coherence, formulating cogent causal explanations, employing inferences to the best explanation, revising beliefs only when there is a good rationale for doing so, and informing decision-making with authoritative testimony (see Harman 1999 for a review).

implicated in Indigenous oppression and white ignorance typically fall short of meeting these requirements.⁸

Another way to argue for this point comes from work on the epistemic value of understanding and its distinction from the value of justified true belief. Some virtue-theoretical accounts, such as Karl Schafer's (2019) account, conceptualize rationality as a virtuous capability exemplified by the capacity for understanding. This suggestion is helpful for analysing the interpretation of injustices in distributed truth-telling because the acquisition of true beliefs about an unjust event—say, a massacre—must be distinguished from the rational historical understanding of that event. A rational understanding of unjust event *e* involves more than a set of true-but-trivial beliefs about *e*. Understanding an injustice involves making sense of it in its historical and cultural context. It may also involve a commitment to non-repetition of the injustice. As Mills argues in relation to overcoming white ignorance: 'improvements in our cognitive practice should have a practical payoff in heightened sensitivity to social oppression and the attempt to reduce and ultimately eliminate that oppression' (Mills 2007: 22).

With that said, the cultural entrenchment of racial hierarchies and biased narratives can erode a group's rational understanding of injustices. DTT accounts for this phenomenon by positing that these instances of epistemic malpractice contribute to the vicious feedback loops that preclude moral revolutions (Figure 1). The risk posed by such vicious loops is the reason why our 'epistemic duties go beyond what we believe to include *what we do*', and include the duty to overcome our 'failure to collect, or expose ourselves to, evidence that we ought to have' (Lackey 2022: 78). To meet our epistemic duties, truth-tellers should take into account research that has identified biases and fallacies contravening basic norms of rationality. For example, agents sometimes seek

⁸ An anonymous reviewer suggested that it was far from obvious how the main counter-narratives offered by pro-colonization white nationalists, such as the claim that 'colonization was a necessary part of progress towards civilization', conflict with the norms of epistemic and practical rationality. We respond that such narratives often fail to interrogate the controversial presuppositions about biased social hierarchies in the concepts of 'progress' and 'civilization'—concepts problematized from an Indigenist standpoint and from the standpoint of Mills' account of white ignorance (§2).

or interpret evidence in ways that are unjustifiably dictated by their existing beliefs, expectations, or hypotheses—these patterns are known as *confirmation biases* and *myside biases* (Stanovich 2021). Furthermore, when reasoning and decisions reveal systematic preferences for the decisionmaker's own group (in-group) and against other groups (out-groups), that sort of bias is known as an *in-group bias* (Scheepers, Spears, *et al.* 2006). In distributed truth-telling, both inquiries into injustices and remedial reasoning can be used to minimize the incidence of such biases as confirmation and in-group bias.

6. Directions for Future Research

According to DTT, the virtuous feedback loops of distributed truth-telling can contribute to moral revolutions by fostering dispositions to engage in rational understanding and collective action. By contrast, vicious feedback loops that entrench the cultural learning of lies and biases can contribute to collective denial that undermines moral revolution. Future research could combine empirical and normative theorizing to assess DTT's conceptualization of the feedback loops within and beyond the Australian context. In addition, among the variety of philosophical questions raised by DTT, we think two lines of questioning deserve particular attention in future research.

First, what conception of *truth* is appropriate to distributed truth-telling? It is likely that the implicit conceptualization of truth in DTT is compatible with several models of truth, including pragmatist, coherentist, and foundationalist models.⁹ Substantivist theories of truth (see, for example, Sher 2016) appear specifically relevant to DTT because they are well suited to capturing what makes the concept of truth so meaningful for Indigenous struggles against collective denial. Moreover, should experimental philosophy inform truth-tellers' distributed truth-telling? Barnard and

⁹ Pluralism about truth may also be compatible with DTT. See, for example, Ulatowski's (2017) discussion of Arne Naess' conception of truth as neither singular nor monolithic. Interestingly, community truth-tellers in Australia understood their task pluralistically as an opportunity to engage with the 'many truths of colonial history' (Barolsky, Berger, and Close 2023: 15).

Ulatowski (2021) provide empirical evidence suggesting that ordinary thinking is neither relativist nor strictly objectivist about truth. Laypersons, on their account, are willing to accept that some truths are more objective than others, depending on the context. How should we expect this flexibility to affect initiatives in distributed truth-telling?

Second, DTT implies a *collective obligation* to support the establishment of virtuous feedback loops. But, as some have wondered (Reynolds 2021: ch. 12), what is the nature of this collective obligation? We suspect it has an epistemic and a moral dimension. With respect to the former, epistemic processes such as the overcoming of white ignorance (Mills 2007, 2015) and the collective responsibility for the production of joint epistemic goods (Schwenkenbecher 2022) are worth exploring under the auspices of distributed truth-telling.

Along the moral dimension, since distributed truth-telling can operate as a kind of reparation, the question is on whom the burden of making reparation lies. Some philosophers have argued the burden of reparation for colonial injustices lies with non-Indigenous people. For Rob Sparrow, 'contemporary non-Aboriginal Australians can collectively be held responsible for past injustices committed against the Aboriginal peoples of this land' (Sparrow 2000: 346). The extension of this argument to truth-telling would suggest non-Indigenous people in Australia are exclusively or primarily collectively responsible for truth-telling. However, placing the duty of truth-telling on non-Indigenous people is problematic because they may be subject to the blinding effect of white ignorance (§2). Thus, we suspect that a place-based approach informed by Indigenous philosophies will broaden the domain of collective responsibility and allow for more nuanced discussion of the history and possibilities of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations. For example, Mary Graham argues for an Indigenous and non-Indigenous collective identity based on 'simply looking after land' (Graham 2008: 183), which suggests that the responsibility for truth-telling lies with everybody connected or committed to particular places. Although we do not have the space to fully consider that proposal here, it may be a good stepping stone for developing remedial imaginings about what long-term, harmonious co-existence in place ought to be like.

Given the myriad ways that Australian society is haunted by the legacies of the Great Australian Silence, a genuine reckoning with the country's past appears as difficult as it

is urgent. Breaking the Great Australian Silence requires reflecting on what it means to do the morally revolutionary truth-telling that can end the epistemic marginalization of Indigenous communities. We have proposed DTT to advance this reflection and support the call of Indigenous communities for truth-telling and reconciliation. In so doing, we hope to have been faithful to the spirit of the Uluru Statement's invitation to 'walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future' (Referendum Council 2017).

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