

Why Objective Truth Is the Ally of Social and Epistemic Justice: A Reply to Jenco

THADDEUS METZ

University of Johannesburg (tmetz@uj.ac.za)

1 Introduction

In an article published elsewhere in this symposium, I critically engage with Leigh Jenco's (2017a) suggestion that there are four basic conceptions of knowledge *prima facie* relevant to showing that one can learn from a foreign philosophical tradition and her claim that one of them, her self-transformative conception, makes the best sense of this judgment. Specifically, I advance a fifth conception of knowledge that appears relevant, and I argue that it does better than Jenco's approach. According to my framework, what makes best sense of the idea that philosophers from one tradition often have something to learn from those in another one¹ is the combination of metaphysical objectivity and epistemological fallibility.

On the one hand, suppose there are objective philosophical facts, ones that obtain independently of the propositional attitudes of human individuals or groups. On the other hand, suppose that it is difficult to access these facts, such that certainty about philosophical matters is almost never forthcoming and it takes a lot of rational reflection by many people over a long span of time in order to make headway. Suppose, moreover, that any long-standing philosophical tradition, roughly one that has put in sustained enquiry over centuries, has some insight into the objective philosophical facts, which means that one's own tradition lacks a monopoly of epistemic access to them and holds some incorrect views about them.

This combination of objectivism with fallibilism, I maintain, best explains the idea that philosophers in one intellectual culture have strong reason to consider the views of philosophers in another if they want to expand their knowledge. One's intellectual culture *could* always be mistaken just because of the objectivity of the pertinent facts, and it is *likely* to be mistaken about them in the absence of systematic exchanges with other cultures that have engaged in substantial rational reflection on them and, chances are, thereby acquired some knowledge.²

In her response to this position, Jenco (2017b) contends that it is insufficient to account adequately for the intuition that various philosophical traditions have an equal standing and that traditions other than one's own are not to be considered inferior. In addition, according to Jenco, an appeal to objective truth on the part of one epistemic culture is unavoidably oppressive, or overly risks being so, with regard to another one.

In this brief reply, I argue that an appeal to objective truth about epistemic and moral justification in fact makes the most sense of Jenco's concerns about inegalitarianism and oppression. Objecting to arrogant expressions of cultural superiority and imperial, colonialist, and related ambitions consequent to them probably commits one to an objectivist framework according to which these ways of treating people are *really* unjustified.

2 Objectivity as Oppressive?

One frequently encounters the suggestion that making a claim to objective knowledge objectionably risks legitimizing colonialism, paternalism, and related forms of oppression. One thinks of self-righteous Christian armies marching off to forcibly convert heathens or European missionaries out to civilize natives. Jenco (2017b) remarks that my view that there are objective facts to which no one culture has a monopoly, thereby requiring multicultural engagement in order to make substantial progress toward the truth, “bears a strong similarity to Enlightenment forms of knowledge, including the approach of JS Mill, who correctly saw such a view as perfectly compatible with British imperial activity in India.”

There is no denying that those in a position of power have often been, and no doubt will continue to be, inclined to try to justify their exercise of it over others by claiming to be in possession of a putatively objective truth. That, however, does not mean that there is no objective truth to be apprehended.

For an analogy, consider that Charles Darwin’s theory of the origin of the human species was put to unfortunate use by some thinkers who, for instance, suggested that it entailed letting the poor die off. However, the misuse of a theory does not mean that it is false or even epistemically unjustified. For all we can tell, Darwin’s theory is true; and it is true objectively, i.e., in virtue of mind-independent biological and historical facts (upon which an overwhelming majority of those who have studied the evidence have recently converged), as well as universally, such that someone who disagreed with the theory would be making a mistake.

The point applies more broadly. Although some people might say that they are uniquely aware of an objective fact and seek to justify oppression in the name of it, it does not follow that there is no objective fact. It does not even follow that they are not actually aware of it.

What follows are instead two things, I think. First, one should be epistemically careful when claiming to know an objective truth in which others have some stake or when holding a belief that could lead to actions that affect others. One need not double check one’s evidence that, say, one has a headache, but there might well be reason to take extra precaution when making a claim about how the human race originated or what the best way to live is.

A second lesson is to be morally careful. Even if there are terrific grounds for thinking that one is aware of an objective truth, does that knowledge really license coercion, denigration, and other forms of disrespect in order to get others to believe it or to live in accordance with it? The answer is presumably “no”; it is perfectly coherent to maintain that one knows something, say, about human nature or values, that is objectively true but to deny that such knowledge authorizes the use of force against others.

In fact, the claim that it would be wrong to use force against others in the light of objective knowledge is *itself* a claim that is plausibly objectively true, or at least implicitly believed to be such upon being made! Jenco is contending that British imperialism in India was unjust. Indeed, her claim is that it was unjust even though some people, such as Mill, thought it was not. But to make such a claim is, I submit, naturally (though, I acknowledge, not necessarily) understood to be asserting that British imperialism was objectively unjust and that Jenco knows at least this one objective moral truth whereas Mill and those like him did not. In short, her claim that British imperialism is wrong is best justified by the kind of knowledge framework I am advancing and that she is rejecting.

On what other basis can Jenco object to the imperialism of the British empire in the way that she does? How else to make good sense of the idea that Mill was incorrect or unjustified about the injustice of imperialism in India, except by positing something mind-independent about injustice that Jenco is claiming knowledge of while claiming that Mill did not have knowledge of it?

The problem I am raising is one that applies to many relativists, post-modernists, and post-colonialists. Often scholars who describe themselves with these terms advance moral claims, about socio-economic or epistemic injustice, that they passionately believe, that they know are not believed by everyone, and that they advance as claims that others would be mistaken or unjustified not also to believe. And then they juxtapose this sort of moral orientation with the further claim that there are no objective moral truths (perhaps since appealing to objective moral truths purportedly occasions injustice). I am afraid I find this combination of views to evince a serious tension that needs to be addressed: if one maintains that others' moral views are mistaken, then one is probably committed to thinking that some moral views are objectively true³ and to maintaining that the others' views are objectively false.

I am not contending that Jenco's claims cannot sensibly be held together, but I need help to see how she is going to avoid incoherence. It would be revealing for Jenco to explain how her knowledge framework can underwrite her moral criticism of British imperialism in India in the face of disagreement, and to consider whether it can do so with as much plausibility as an objectivist one according to which such imperialism was *really* unjust, something that many societies have thankfully learned over time.⁴

3 Objectivity as Inegalitarian?

Jenco advances another, distinct criticism of my appeal to objective truth, which is that, even if it did not legitimate intuitively unjust socio-economic practices such as imperialism, it could not avoid epistemic injustice. The latter "cognitive imperialism" (Jenco 2017b) comes in two forms that Jenco mentions.

On the one hand, Jenco points out that we might make a mistake and believe ourselves to be in touch with an objective truth or justified in a certain belief when we are not. She says, "we may very well reject views of foreign others as 'wrong' or 'underdeveloped' when in fact (unbeknownst to us) it is the constraints of our own worldview or discipline, and not some objective true state of the world, that entail such judgments" (Jenco 2017b).

In reply, of course it is possible for one culture to be mistaken and to think that another one is incorrect when the latter is in fact correct. But that point is part and parcel of the fallibilist epistemology I am advancing. According to my view, there are objective philosophical truths to which any long-standing culture probably has some access. Implicit in this approach is that one's own culture is likely mistaken about some things, that other cultures are likely mistaken about some things, and that it is difficult to find the mistakes without substantial cross-cultural engagement! Keeping this fallibilism in mind alongside the positing of objective truth should lead one to be epistemically careful when making knowledge claims of philosophical realities and to take other perspectives seriously as rivals.

Epistemic care need not mean the constant suspension of belief, however. The prospect of mistake is no reason to categorically prohibit thinking something to be objectively true. The earth is round, dinosaurs lived well more than 10,000 years ago, and water is H₂O. We are not certain, are not 100

percent sure, of these scientific claims, but we are justified in taking ourselves to know these apparently objective truths despite others who might disagree. Analogous claims could well be forthcoming when it comes to issues of metaphysics and ethics, on the supposition there are objective facts about them.

The other worry about epistemic injustice that Jenco discusses is that, upon pursuing (putatively) objective truth from within one's own epistemic culture, one could not avoid viewing other knowledge frameworks as implausible. She suggests that some rivals "cannot be represented by a dominant discourse or community of knowledge production in any way other than as an inferior form of knowledge" (Jenco 2017b), and that my objectivist fallibilism means that views that conflict with one's own are

rendered not as true forms of difference (in which multiple heterogeneous forms of being or claims about the world can co-exist simultaneously as legitimate rivals) but rather as instances of either right or wrong claims about the world, that must be resolved within the cross-cultural philosopher's search for truth (Jenco 2017b).

The example Jenco gives is of an indigenous people that explains many events by appeal to the agency of imperceptible, divine beings. From a Western scientific worldview in the 21st century, this people would be incorrect, if not also unjustified, to claim that the movement of planetary bodies is a function of the efforts of gods or angels (as medieval Europeans tended to do prior to Isaac Newton).

For an initial reply, I wonder whether it makes it any better if one recognizes that, from this indigenous people's perspective, the Western scientists would be mistaken. There is a parity of viewpoint (though of course only rarely a parity of power) upon positing an objective fact of the matter and the presence of at least two incompatible accounts of it. Both sides will view the other party as incorrect, and there is at least a kind of epistemic (even if not political) evenhandedness, here.

It does not follow that one should make those with the rival view feel bad, or that the other view should be forcibly wiped off the face of the earth, or that it has no right to exist. These are issues about what to *say* to others or about them, and about which *choices* to make when relating to others, and so they concern *socio-economic practices* that would be (in my view, objectively) unjust. These issues are therefore distinct from the present matter of whether there is *epistemic* injustice simply in *judging* others to be mistaken. The present issue is about how rival views are "represented," as Jenco states above, not how the people who hold the views are treated.

Of course, if one believes that other people are systematically mistaken about a topic, and if one continues to believe that upon having taken epistemic care, then one is unlikely to go out of one's way to consult them if one is interested in *knowledge* about it. Yes, one could be mistaken, as per the fallibilism I am advancing, and so one might have reason of *some* strength to consult them. However, it would be fair of Jenco to note that, at a certain point of perceived epistemic justification, my framework grounds little reason of *knowledge pursuit* to take this sort of rival seriously.

At this point, I find myself willing to bite the bullet. Should geologists and cosmologists really be spending their time trying to engage with, say, members of the Flat Earth Society or other people who tenaciously hold beliefs that logically contradict each other about the nature of our planet? Would the scientists *necessarily* be epistemically *unjust* toward them in not citing them, not attending their conferences, and the like? Conversely, would there unavoidably be "cognitive imperialism" in the Flat Earthers merely

believing that the scientists are incorrect for failing to apprehend what they deem to be objectively true? My intuitive answers are “no” to these questions.

Furthermore, as I mentioned toward the end of my previous article about Jenco’s conception of knowledge, there are probably epistemic reasons other than knowledge pursuit, particularly concerning the development of imagination, to continue to reflect on worldviews that appear to be false or unjustified, for all we can tell. And there are also reasons of morality and etiquette not to ignore, let alone denigrate, people whose worldviews seem to us to be false. If I were to visit an indigenous people and some of its elders shared their cosmology with me, I would be rude to be dismissive or not to listen at all. However, these matters again concern how to treat people who hold certain views, not the present issue of how to appraise the views that people hold.

4 Conclusion

At this point the natural suggestion to make on Jenco’s behalf is to go reaching for the first objection, concerning oppression. It might continue to seem as though one should not be inclined to believe others’ worldviews to be false since doing so would be likely to occasion disrespectful behavior, either small-scale dismissiveness or large-scale colonialism.

However, I like to think that the exchange between myself and Jenco is a counterexample to this hypothesis. She thinks, or at least suspects, that I am (objectively?) incorrect about what knowledge must be like in order for cross-cultural philosophical engagements to make sense, and I have the same orientation toward her view. I submit, though, that our exchange has not involved epistemic injustice, oppression, or anything similar. By my lights we have instead exchanged competing views (about a mind-independent subject matter) with an eye toward learning from one another and with a respectful disposition. If we two intellectuals can do it, then why not two broader intellectual cultures?⁵

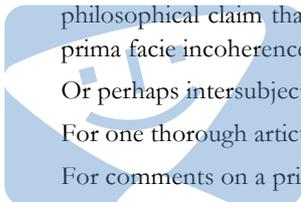
¹ In this brief essay, I set aside the issue of how to distinguish different philosophical traditions or intellectual cultures. The points made here about knowledge should apply, regardless of how one draws a distinction between two different epistemic communities.

² Another move would be to posit the existence of philosophical problems that demand consensus in order to be resolved, a move inspired by the work of Jürgen Habermas. This intersubjective approach, which contrasts with my objective one, is worth considering elsewhere. However, one reason I have for favoring objectivism is skepticism about the prospect of consensus ever being achieved among all rational enquirers. Another reason is that consensus, which has not yet been achieved, has not itself grounded the philosophical claim that consensus is necessary to resolve philosophical problems, meaning that there is a *prima facie* incoherence in the intersubjective position.

³ Or perhaps intersubjectively true, i.e., in virtue of consensus, as per note 2 above.

⁴ For one thorough articulation of such a perspective, applied especially to slavery, see Gilbert (1990).

⁵ For comments on a prior draft of this article, I am grateful to the editors of the *Journal of World Philosophies*.



Smile