

Determining Personal Falsity: A Gadamerian Critique of The Enlightenment

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**Abstract:**

Through a Gadamerian critique of Enlightenment objectivism, the discussion of right and wrong perception is based on the minimums of immediate illegitimizing of certain prejudices and the determining of one's own perception as right or wrong in opposition to expertise; this ultimately allows knowledge to be laid out in an anti-relativist position whilst still permitting diversity of perception, proving that opinion necessitates its own change and development over time on both the micro and macro levels of thought.

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Every day you are wrong, and someone else is right. At least, that's what the so-called "someone else" would claim. Trials of right and wrong have plagued philosophical debates for centuries and continue to do so. As Western relativism becomes more and more frequent in local vernacular, and as objectivist claims become more and more pervasive, when can we claim someone to be wrong? Likewise, when are *you* wrong? The discussion of knowledge originates in Enlightenment-era philosophy, and its creation of objectivity. The development of objectivism inevitably leads to Gadamer's critique of the Enlightenment, and its "prejudice against prejudice." After establishing this framework of knowledge, I will discuss the automatic disqualification of opinion followed by the criteria for determining if one's own opinion is incorrect. With this, the changing of an opinion is understood as a process involving a plethora of steps finalizing in the understanding of the flexibility of knowledge predicated on the humility to listen and continue the process of learning.

The pinnacle of Enlightenment influence on epistemology was the development of objectivity. Cartesian philosophy claims that true knowledge can only be obtained by transcending one's own prejudices and biases to reach an "objective" level of understanding. For Enlightenment thinkers, truth only comes through a bird's eye perspective.<sup>1</sup> Many scrutinized this concept of "transcending one's own prejudices," as objectivity is thought to be unattainable. Gadamer's primary critique of the Enlightenment is its "prejudice against prejudice." To Gadamer, objectivity is an impossible ideal, so instead, we should embrace our prejudices and attempt to understand them. Individuals cannot escape or transcend their history and location within the world, so we must permit a variety of knowledge rather than conceptualizing a singular, objective truth. With this, Gadamer does not use the word "prejudice" as we do today. He more so defines it as the standards of information we hold and the background(s) we, as knowers, come from. Gadamer asserts that knowledge is attained in a circular motion, otherwise known as the hermeneutic circle; we perceive a phenomenon and compare it to our storehouse of knowledge, then reconfigure our perception of the phenomenon based on the comparison. This becomes a cycle until we have breached some sort of satisfying understanding. The ascertainment of knowledge comes from the ability to compare a phenomenon to the concepts one already knows. This permits a multiplicity of interpretations and perceptions that continue into the development of "prejudices."<sup>2</sup>

While Gadamer's theory of knowledge is more attainable than Cartesian objectivity, some have concerns with Gadamerian philosophy, and its close ties with relativism. There must be times when one interpretation outweighs another. There must be times when someone is "wrong" and someone else is "right" in their understanding of the same phenomenon. In my

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<sup>1</sup> Descartes. "Discourse and Essays." 1637.

<sup>2</sup> David Detmer. "Gadamer's Critique Of The Enlightenment." 1997.

stance against objectivism, I do not wish to relinquish the use of the terms “right” and “wrong,” for they are colloquial and frequent; I more so wish to diminish the ties those terms have to objectivist claims. There will never be a point of view so objective and true that it can be deemed universally “right” with all opposing views universally “wrong.” Yet, there are many times when one individual is less wrong than another and therefore “right.” The question comes to be: if there is no objective truth, and there will always be a multiplicity of interpretations, when can one determine a right interpretation and a wrong one?

Some prejudices can be immediately discredited and deemed wrong. Following Georgia Warnke in her piece “Legitimate Prejudices,” a point of view that is a) incongruous with the whole and/or b) dogmatic can be immediately discredited. Warnke states that if an individual perception of a phenomenon follows a part-whole incongruity, then it can be deemed illegitimate. There must be a harmony of parts that leads the individual to the “whole” or the complete understanding of the phenomenon at hand. If the parts do not properly lead to the whole, then their interpretation/prejudice is illegitimate. If a prejudice does have part-whole congruency, it does not automatically deem that prejudice as legitimate, for part-whole incongruity is only a disqualifier, not a qualifier. Continuing, if a prejudice stems from a dogma, as in a belief that is set by an authority and stubbornly held to be true, then it is also illegitimate.<sup>3</sup> Though Warnke’s two disqualifiers are open and understandable, they do not seem to understand illegitimate prejudices to be as dangerous as they can. I’d like to further Warnke’s dogmatic principle, in that an individual’s prejudice can be immediately discredited if it is also apparently “dangerous.” A dangerous prejudice furthers, enables, or enacts harm upon a person or group of persons. It is likely a bigoted and demeaning point of view. These views are not simply “wrong” but also deeply threatening, as they often perpetuate violence against others. Therein, a view can

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<sup>3</sup> Georgia Warnke. “Legitimate Prejudices.” 1997.

be immediately discredited if it follows one or both of Warnke's disqualifiers, part-whole incongruity, and dogmatism, or if it is inherently dangerous.

Often, there will be points of view that are not incongruous, dogmatic, or dangerous, yet they are still false. It is unfair and difficult to adequately deem someone else's point of view as false. This would involve understanding their other prejudices and their world to determine where their point of view stems from within their personal epistemology. To deem someone else's point of view as incorrect would involve, as Maria Lugones puts it, "world-traveling." According to Lugones, to properly love and connect with someone, one must travel to their world. One must see one's own self through the other's eyes and begin to understand the epistemological framework said individual operates within.<sup>4</sup> This requires an immense amount of empathy and also an immense amount of time. I believe that not only to love and connect with someone but to properly address someone's point of view as incorrect, one must travel to their world. Deeming someone's stance as incorrect without understanding where that stance originates from within the individual at hand is inconclusive and problematic. To get a proper and best-as-possible understanding of someone's stance, especially a stance that opposes one's own, one must address the prejudices tied to the stance itself. This addressing inherently involves traveling to their world.

"World-traveling," as Lugones understands it, is a difficult and heavy task. It is unfair to ask that one travel to every single person's world to properly understand their stances, nonetheless this would be an impossible feat. Most simply do not have the time or energy to empathize with every person they encounter, though it would be an ideal to do so. Therein, I cannot properly set forth criteria to determine if another person's point of view is incorrect, but I can put forth criteria to determine if my own point of view is incorrect. I do not have to travel to

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<sup>4</sup> Maria Lugones. "Playfulness, 'World'-Traveling, and Loving Perception." 1987.

my own world and empathize with my own self because I am already in said world understanding said self. I can be self-reflexive and determinate of the prejudices from which a certain belief of mine derives.

However, it is often difficult to determine when one is wrong and when another person is right or “less wrong.” I would like to enact a specific setting in which I can operate under to make my criteria more tangible to the real world. The criteria I will put forth most directly applies to one-on-one dialogue, in which the other person has a directly opposing stance on an issue. For comprehension’s sake, I will utilize the same, theoretical example throughout this piece of a dialogue between me, a white woman, and a black man on the validity of racism within the issue of police brutality. When encountering an individual with an opposing viewpoint, one must first deduce if the individual at hand is an *expert* in the field of inquiry. Here, an expert can entail either educational knowledge or experiential knowledge, otherwise known as “practical and propositional knowledge” to Vrinda Dalmiya and Linda Alcoff. The two of them state that knowledge comes about in two forms: propositional and practical. Propositional knowledge is what most epistemology has restricted itself to, often excluding many with practical knowledge from the status of “expert.”<sup>5</sup> I would like to continue with this notion and state that one does not need both propositional and practical knowledge to be considered an expert, but of course, it is ideal. Therein, the lack of one form of knowledge does not negate the applicability of the term expert upon the individual at hand. In my example, if I converse with this black man about police brutality, the black man would be more of an expert in this field of inquiry, as they have more experience with the subject matter. I could have more overall propositional knowledge, but their experiential/practical knowledge would trump my holistic,

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<sup>5</sup> Vrinda Dalmiya and Linda Alcoff. “Are ‘Old Wives’ Tales’ Justified?” 1993.

educational approach toward the subject matter. In this case, the black man would be the expert in police brutality no matter their level of education in relation to me.

This deduction of expertise coaxes a hierarchical standard of knowledge. This hierarchy is inherently imperfect. There is no sure way to determine who is more of an expert all the time. Likewise, many times people will likely be equivalent in their knowledge or have equivalent practical versus propositional knowledge. This hierarchy is a case-to-case basis of understanding that is imperfect but still a good aid for determining legitimacy. If I can assuredly deem myself lower on the hierarchy than the other person with whom I am in dialogue, then it is likely that I need to listen to them more than they listen to me.

Following the acknowledgment of expertise within the opposing individual, there will be a “confirmation process.” Encountering an individual who has an opposing viewpoint, and who is also an expert in the field of inquiry at hand, will be a signal to reconsider one’s position. True change of opinion will come when their opinion is confirmed. One must search for the opinion of other experts within the field of inquiry to determine if this opposing viewpoint stands. If multiple experts hold the opposing viewpoint, then it is likely time to change opinion. There is a chance I could encounter a conservative black man who frames the issue of police brutality to be absent of racial motivation. If this was the opposing viewpoint against my own, I would acknowledge the individual as an expert in racial violence and then compare his viewpoint to other black men’s stances on said topic. If enough “racial violence experts,” obtaining their status as experts through propositional and/or practical knowledge that is greater than my own, state that police brutality has no racial motivation, then I should be inclined to utilize this stance rather than my opposing stance. However, this is an unlikely scenario, as many black activists strongly believe that police brutality stems from racist ideologies. So, if the black man I am in dialogue

with holds an opposing stance, that police brutality has nothing to do with race, and I compare this stance with other black activists, and his stance does not align with the others, I am not inclined to change my opinion. There will be plenty of times when individual experts give an opinion that their community does not hold to be true. We cannot change our opinion after one expert provides an opposing account. That is why the confirmation process is key. An expert's differing stance is merely a signal to continue research into the inquiry at hand.

Through all this, the most important aspect is not simply a step or process, but it is the attitude one holds toward knowledge and opinion in general. Humility is keenly necessary, especially in the face of practical, experiential knowledge. If I hold a profusion of educational prestige yet am faced with an opposing viewpoint from someone I deem educationally inferior, it takes humility and empathy to consider them an experientially-based expert in the discussion at hand (if they are). In Miranda Fricker's book *Epistemic Injustice*, she qualifies this as "testimonial justice." Many people deserve to be listened to even though they do not hold the same level of educational prestige, or propositional knowledge, as an opposing counsel. It is the "virtue that the influence of identity prejudice on the hearer's credibility judgment is detected and corrected for."<sup>6</sup> Further, truly listening to them and rethinking one's point of view takes a whole reworking of what some may consider knowledge and prestige of opinion. This is easier if one understands the process of changing opinions as 1) continuing their education and 2) opinions as something that are meant to be changed. One's opinion should always be flexible to change and capable of maneuvering. One should never be stern in an opinion, as one's opinion is always a product of their bias and their location. An unchanging opinion or point of view on any subject matter would need to be objectively true to be deserving of not changing, otherwise it would be considered "dogmatic" under Warnke's perception. As this objectivity is impossible to

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<sup>6</sup> Miranda Fricker. "Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing." 2007. (Section 9).



achieve, one must always allow their prejudices and biases the fluidity to change and adapt to the evidence surrounding them. Changing opinion is not black and white, it is a process that involves time and humility. It is even likely for someone to change their opinion yet still hold sway for that original standpoint. This is okay, as opinions need flexibility.

The Enlightenment era re-envisioned the definition and creation of true knowledge, which then became heavily criticized and reinterpreted. Gadamerian philosophy sheds light on the incessant bias the Enlightenment had towards prejudice and that several understandings can coexist about the same phenomenon. While this view of knowledge was more achievable, it began to breach the realm of radical relativism and deny the validity of “right” and “wrong.” There must be some minimum of illegitimate knowledge to prevent dangerous or problematic opinions from ensuing. Yet, it is difficult to determine someone else's own stance as inadequate or “wrong,” as one cannot be self-reflexive on someone else’s behalf. However, one can be self-reflexive in their own stances and opinions. To determine inadequacy within one’s opinion in the face of an individual with an opposing stance, one must first understand the other individual as a practical and/or propositional expert within the field at hand. Further, this signal of change leads to a confirmation phase, in which one confirms or denies the opposing viewpoint with other experts. Throughout all of this inquiry, one must hold the attitude that opinions and knowledge are meant to change over time. Change predicates opinion, and a changing of opinion is not the dissolution of ego but the continuation of education. Humility is the crucial figure in the opinion process that stands as the fountainhead of good knowledge.