DETERMINING PERSONAL FALSITY: A GADAMERIAN CRITIQUE OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

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Abstract. This paper attempts to develop a criterion for determining when one's own opinion is incorrect. I first establish a Gadamerian critique of Enlightenment objectivism, and continue by stating that neither radical objectivism nor radical relativism is an applicable standard within epistemology. There must be both some valid and some invalid opinions. In dialogue with Georgia Warnke, the discussion of right and wrong perception is based on the minimums of immediate illegitimizing of certain prejudices: part-whole incongruity and dogmatic opinions.

Further, in conjunction with María Lugones's theory of "world-travelling", I state that one is unable to adequately dismiss an individual's opinion on a phenomenon until they have "travelled" to the individual's "world" and experienced the phenomenon through that individual's personal epistemology. To get a proper and best-as-possible understanding of someone's stance, especially a stance that opposes one's own, one must address or interrogate the prejudices that are tied to the stance itself, and meaningfully investigating another person's prejudices/perceptions requires travelling to their world. As this is incredibly difficult to do and requires high amounts of time and epistemic/hermeneutic labour, it becomes more efficient to be reflexive for only oneself than for others. I develop a criterion to determine such personal falsity, where, first, building off Vrinda Dalmiya and Linda Alcoff, one must determine either propositional/theoretical or practical/educational expertise in the individual with the opposing opinion to one's own. An expert's differing stance is merely a signal to continue with research into the relevant inquiry. One must maintain the belief that opinions necessitate their own change, and expertise does not always stem from those with the most prestige behind their name. Humility is the crucial factor in the opinion-changing process that stands as the fountainhead of good knowledge.

Keywords: philosophical hermeneutics, epistemic justice, prejudice, expertise, Gadamer, epistemology, world-travelling

INTRODUCTION

Every day, you are wrong, and someone else is right. At least, that's what the so-called "someone else" would claim. Trials surrounding epistemic rightness and wrongness have plagued philosophical debates for centuries, and continue to do so. Relativism and objectivism are often pitted against one another, with the idea that one can only hold either a relativist or objectivist epistemological position in life. I attempt to place forth a blend of the two dichotomies in order to pursue a more tangible and applicable philosophy. The discussion of objectivism finds its footing in Enlightenment-era philosophy. In *Discourse on Method* (1637), René Descartes put forward one of the most influential arguments on behalf of objective knowledge, a position that was endorsed throughout the Enlightenment period (~1637-1804).

The belief that one can achieve a bird's eye view of the world, void of all prejudice and personal status on the phenomenon, came under direct critique for many philosophers to come (Descartes 1986). The primary critique of Cartesian objectivism that I will work with in this piece is Gadamer's hermeneutics. The development of objectivism inevitably leads to Gadamer's critique of the Enlightenment, and its "prejudice against prejudice" (Gadamer 2014, 283). The remainder of my paper will be organised as follows: First, I will establish the foundations of Gadamerian hermeneutic understanding. I attempt to lay the base work for epistemological critiques through a Gadamerian perspective that are the core building blocks of my argument. Second, I will discuss illegitimate prejudices in conjunction with Georgia Warnke's work in order to establish points of view that can be readily dismissed by other individuals (Warnke 1997). Third, in dialogue with Maria Lugones's idea of "world-travelling", I will discuss why it is so difficult to determine falsity within other individuals and why I maintain a preference in discussing personal falsity over the opinions of others (Lugones 1987). Finally, I will establish my criterion for determining personal falsity within one's own opinions and the basis for such an

epistemological framework. With this, the changing of an opinion is understood as a process involving a plethora of steps, culminating in the understanding of the flexibility of knowledge predicated on the humility to listen and continue the process of learning.

PART I: GADAMERIAN HERMENEUTICS

The pinnacle of Enlightenment influence on epistemology was the development of its concept of objectivity. Critical Enlightenment theory, Cartesianism, for instance, claims that true knowledge can only be obtained by transcending one's own prejudices and biases so as to reach an "objective" level of understanding. For Enlightenment thinkers, truth and/or knowledge can only be discerned through a bird's-eye perspective (Descartes 1986). Many scrutinised the very possibility of wholly transcending one's own prejudices, and asserted, instead, that if objectivity requires us to do so, then it is simply unattainable. Gadamer would be counted among such critics.

As stated prior, Gadamer's primary critique of the Enlightenment is its "prejudice against prejudice itself" (Gadamer 2014, 283). According to Gadamer's phenomenological analyses, transcending one's prejudices so as to perform impartial inquiry and thereby arrive at objective knowledge is an impossible ideal for human beings. Instead, Gadamer recommends that we should embrace our prejudices and attempt to understand them, or at least understand that they perform a productive rather than obstructive role in the process of human understanding. Gadamer states, "a person who is trying to understand a text is always projecting". In that, upon first encounter with a new phenomenon, the observer projects interpretation onto the phenomenon at hand (Gadamer 2014, 279). This projection then aligns itself with the phenomenon and is returned back to the individual. The observer may now repeat the projection until the phenomenon matches the interpretation. This form of understanding, in which Gadamer frames human

knowledge, must start with an initial basis projection: "interpretation begins with fore-conceptions that are replaced by more suitable ones" (Gadamer 2014, 279).

With this, Gadamer asserts that understanding is not just enhanced or affected by personal bias and prejudice; rather, understanding is predicated upon such. For instance, if an individual encounters an unfamiliar object, say a piece of new technology they have never seen before, to understand the object, they will begin by comparing it to what they already know. They may state that it has the appearance of a computer but the shape of a phone, etc. Therein, they will project previous bias or "prejudice" onto the new technology at hand to begin to understand. If the new technology does not act like a computer, for example, then the individual will project a new understanding onto the object. This will repeat until the individual's understanding satisfactorily aligns with the phenomenon at hand. Due to this predication of projection, from Gadamer's perspective, individuals cannot escape and/or transcend their respective histories and social location(s) within the world, whilst such experience is vital for understanding. This means that *all* truth-claims are inevitably located in some way (culturally, historically, socially, etc). For that reason, Gadamer insists that we must allow for the possibility of a variety of knowledge(s) rather than conceptualising a singular, objective truth. As in, an individual may find satisfactory congruency between their projection and the phenomenon at hand that differs from someone else's understanding, allowing for two separate yet permissible understandings of the same object (Gadamer 2014). Likewise, an individual can approach a phenomenon from a wholly different bias than another, and the two individuals can reach the same satisfactory understanding from separate paths. As in, there can be multiple means to the same end and one means to different ends.

If understanding grounds itself in our biased perceptions of the world, to which we cannot escape, then we must acknowledge and accept these prejudices. Gadamer states, "the fundamental prejudice of the Enlightenment is the prejudice against prejudice itself", in

that the Enlightenment thinker, grounding oneself in objective knowledge, projects meaning onto phenomena from a prejudiced lens against prejudice (Gadamer 2014, 283). If one encounters a phenomenon with the ideal of objectivity and dislike for personal bias, then they are not truly encountering the phenomenon objectively. It is a cyclical process of hypocrisy, as the more defiant of prejudices one becomes, the more prejudiced they act.

With this in mind, it is important to recognise that Gadamer does not use the word "prejudice" in the more colloquial sense with which we are familiar today. He more so defines it as the standards of information we hold and the background(s) we, as knowers, come from: "*prejudice* means a judgement that is rendered before all the elements that determine a situation have been finally examined" (Gadamer 2014, 283). To Gadamer, "prejudice certainly does not necessarily mean a false judgement, but part of the idea is that it can have either a positive or a negative value", in that prejudice has the connotation one prescribes to it through their usage (Gadamer 2014, 283). With the ascertainment of a multiplicity of satisfactory interpretations, evidently, there is a multiplicity of satisfactory prejudices.

While Gadamer's theory of knowledge is more attainable than Cartesian objectivity, some have concerns with Gadamerian philosophy and its close ties with epistemological 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 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 *at least* less wrong than another and therefore "right".

The question, therefore, becomes: if there is no objective truth, and for that reason, there will always be a multiplicity of plausible

interpretations, how can one distinguish between right and wrong interpretations?

PART II: ILLEGITIMATE PREJUDICES

There are criteria that can be used such that some prejudices/interpretations can be discredited and deemed wrong. In her piece entitled "Legitimate Prejudices", Georgia Warnke argues that a point of view or interpretation can be rejected if it is either a) incongruous with the whole and/or b) dogmatic (Warnke 1997). Both Gadamer and Warnke believe that this delegitimisation will not be immediate; points of view that are incongruous and/or dogmatic still need serious contemplation and engagement to ensure illegitimisation. Continuing, Warnke states that if an interpretation of a phenomenon demonstrates part-whole incongruity, then it can be deemed illegitimate. This is congruent with a long line of hermeneutics, which has long argued that for an interpretation to count as plausible, 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 contradict and/or are incompatible with the interpretive whole, then their interpretation/prejudice is illegitimate. This would be a valid yet unsound argument; the conclusion leads from the premises but one, if not more, of the premises is untrue (Warnke 1997). An example of this illegitimate prejudice would be the floatation test for witch trials. The idea was that all witches float in water, so if a woman is thrown into a body of water and sinks, she is not a witch. The argument is sound [p1: all witches float, p2: that woman did not float, c: therefore, she is not a witch], but premise 1 is false. Therefore, there is a part-whole incongruence to the perception of women/witches and their ability to float in water.

On the other hand, if a prejudice/interpretation does have part-whole congruency, it does not automatically deem that prejudice as legitimate, for part-whole incongruity is only a disqualifier, rather

than a qualifier. If a prejudice/interpretation is stubbornly held to be true, then it may also be illegitimate, particularly when counter-evidence or a counter-interpretation has been offered but the dogmatic interpreter fails to engage with such evidence/interpretations because they believe that their interpretation is the *only* correct one; they believe they have nothing left to learn from anyone or anything else (Warnke 1997). Further, a dogmatic point of view is a view that one holds whilst still encountering opposing points of view that they then adamantly reject or do not take seriously. For example, many individuals believe that vaccines cause autism even though a plethora of studies have shown the invalidity of such a claim. Those who believe that vaccines cause autism hold said belief stubbornly true, as many opposing arguments have invalidated or opposed the claim.

Although Warnke's two disqualifying criteria are helpful, and it is understandable how one might be able to invoke them during an interpretive dispute, Warnke does not seem to acknowledge just how *dangerous* particular illegitimate prejudices/interpretations are and/or can be. As such, I would like to expand upon Warnke's conception of the dogmatically-held prejudice, and argue that an individual's prejudice must urgently be discredited if it is not only dogmatic (*i.e.* "my interpretation is correct, and no further inquiry or dialogue is needed) but 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. Therefore, a view can and ought to be discredited if it meets one or both of Warnke's disqualifiers, part-whole incongruity and dogmatism, but is also inherently dangerous. An example of a dangerous prejudice would be that a wife cannot say no to their husband. By simply holding this belief, the believer creates harm and danger. This is a point of view that can be deemed illegitimate.

Most illegitimate prejudices can fit one or more of these categories: there is danger in believing that vaccines cause autism, as

not vaccinating children places them in danger of many preventable illness; there is a part-whole incongruence to the belief that vaccines cause autism, as the premise that leads to the conclusion to not vaccinate children is false; and the belief that vaccines cause autism is held dogmatically, as it has been opposed and disagreed with many times. When a belief is not dogmatic or dangerous or incongruent, it does not follow that the belief is thereby legitimate. A belief is not inherently legitimate because it is not disposed of as illegitimate through said criterion. A point of view will always be up for debate.

PART III: WORLD-TRAVELLING

For the opinions that are not incongruous, dogmatic, or dangerous, it is unfair and difficult to adequately deem such opinions as false. To do so would involve understanding the individual's other prejudices and environment to determine where their point of view stems from within their personal epistemology. That is to say, to wholly conceptualise an individual's understanding of a phenomenon, one must travel to their world and enter their rhizomatic epistemology. The concept of "world-travelling" in a relationship sense comes from Maria Lugones's piece "Playfulness, World-Travelling, and Loving Perception". According to Maria 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 within which individual operates within (Lugones 1987). This requires an immense amount of empathy and also an immense amount of time and epistemic labour.

I agree with Lugones that meaningful connection requires world-travelling. In my view, however, world-travelling not only makes possible an emotional bond with other people, but it likewise makes possible an epistemic bond with other people. In fact, the emotional bond might be made possible by the epistemic bond. My version of world-travelling is not only the process by which we can grow to

love other people, but it is also the process by which we can grow to understand other people and learn about the world as they experience it. This process might teach us how another person understands the world, and why they understand it in that particular way (*i.e.* the experiences they've had in the past, and how those past experiences shape their expectations for the future). As such, I believe that one cannot actually identify someone else's point of view as incorrect until they've travelled to their world. Deeming someone else's stance as incorrect without understanding where that stance originates from within the individual is inconclusive and problematic. Most people have reasonings behind their beliefs and reasonings behind those reasonings and so on. 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 travelling to their world.

"World-travelling", as Lugones understands it, is a difficult and heavy task. One must engage with the individual at intense and almost uncomfortable levels. One must see their own stance on a phenomenon through the eyes of their opposer. World-travelling is emotionally fatiguing. Therein, 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 empathise with *every* person they encounter, though it would be ideal to do so. For these reasons, I cannot adequately set forth criteria to determine whether another person's point of view is incorrect, but at a minimum, I can put forth criteria to determine whether my own point of view is incorrect. I do not have to travel to my own world and empathise with my own self because I am already in said world, understanding said self. I can, nevertheless, be self-reflexive and attempt to bring into focus the prejudices from which my own beliefs derive.

PART IV: CRITERION

Now, I will begin to establish my criterion for determining personal falsity. I would like to enact a specific setting in which I can operate to make my criteria more tangible to the real world. The criteria I put forth most directly apply to one-on-one dialogue, in which the other person has a directly opposing stance on an issue. For comprehension's sake, I will utilise the same theoretical example throughout this section of a dialogue between two conversation partners on the relevance of racism to the issue of police brutality. Let's refer to the first conversation partner as Nathanial, a black physician who has both witnessed and experienced police brutality, and I'll refer to the second conversation partner as Sarah, a white graduate student who specialises in literature and has watched documentaries on police brutality. When engaged in dialogue with someone who expresses an opposing/contradictory viewpoint, it is first essential to deduce whether the individual is more of an expert *in the relevant field of inquiry*.

Generally, one conceives of an "expert" as someone with an abundance of "theoretical or propositional knowledge" (*S* knows that p*)* relevant to the topic under discussion. Here, however, I define an expert as someone who possesses either theoretical/propositional or practical/experiential knowledge, or both. As Vrinda Dalmiya and Linda Martín Alcoff elucidate in their paper, "Are 'Old Wives Tales' Justified", knowledge comes about in two forms: theoretical/propositional and practical/experiential. The lack of one form of knowledge does not negate the applicability of the term expert to the relevant person under investigation. Here, an expert can entail either educational knowledge or experiential knowledge, otherwise known as "practical and propositional knowledge" (Dalmiya Alcoff, 1993).

As Vrinda Dalmiya and Linda Martín Alcoff elucidate in their 1993 paper, knowledge comes about in two forms: propositional and practical. By and large, traditional epistemology has limited its attention to propositional knowledge, with the consequence that

most persons with practical knowledge have been overlooked and/or denied the status of "expert" (Dalmiya Alcoff, 1993). I would like to continue with this notion and argue that one does not need both propositional and practical knowledge to be considered an expert, but of course, that would be ideal. In my view, the lack of one form of knowledge does not negate the applicability of the term expert to the individual under investigation.

If Sarah were to converse with Nathanial about police brutality, Nathanial would qualify as more of an expert in this field of inquiry, as Nathanial has more *direct and first-person experience* with the relevant subject matter. His personal experiences and first-hand accounts are simply more germane to the argument than to Sarah's indirect or third-person exposure to the topic. It is *experience* and not identity that stamps Nathaniel as an expert on this topic.

This analysis of expertise coaxes an implicit hierarchy of knowledge. This hierarchy is inherently imperfect. There is no sure way to determine who is more of an expert all the time, or in every case. There will, undoubtedly, be ambiguous cases, and just such cases ought to invite scrutiny, dialogue, and careful consideration. Likewise, there may be cases where discourse partners have equivalent measures of expert-conferring knowledge (of both the propositional and/or practical kind) or where discourse partners have equivalent measures of practical versus propositional knowledge. As such, this hierarchy has limitations, cannot be universally invoked, needs to be sensitive to nuances of the situation, and is, for these reasons, inherently imperfect. Even so, I argue that it nevertheless provides a good aid for determining expertise and interpretive legitimacy. If I can definitively identify myself as lower on the epistemic hierarchy than the other person with whom I am in dialogue, then it is likely that I ought to take their account more seriously than I take mine.

Following the acknowledgement of expertise within the opposing individual, one should proceed with a "confirmation process". Encountering an individual who has an opposing viewpoint and who is also an expert in the field of inquiry at hand

should be a signal to reconsider one's position. True change of opinion should come when their opinion is confirmed.

One must search for the opinion of other experts within the relevant field of inquiry so as to determine whether the opposing viewpoint stands. If multiple experts likewise hold the opposing viewpoint, then it is likely time to change opinion. 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.

Throughout all of this, the most important feature involved in the process of identifying that one's own view is hermeneutically weaker than those advanced by other persons with whom one is in conversation, is neither a particular step nor even the process as a whole. Most importantly, it is the *attitude* that one holds toward knowledge and opinion in general, and toward their own truth claims in particular. Humility is keenly necessary, especially when in dialogue with those who have practical and/or experiential expertise about the topic under discussion. If I have formal training on the topic under investigation, yet I am confronted with an opposing viewpoint from someone whom I consider "less educated", it takes humility to recognise that while my discourse partner might lack "formal training" on the issue, they've nevertheless developed expertise on the topic through personal experience. Miranda Fricker, who works in epistemic injustice, might consider this an instance of "testimonial justice". There is a wide range of human beings who deserve to be listened to and taken seriously as it pertains to particular issues, even though they might lack formal training and therefore theoretical/practical knowledge on the topic under investigation. As a corrective, Fricker recommends the virtue of *testimonial justice,* which she defines as the "virtue [such] that the influence of identity prejudice on the hearer's credibility judgment is detected and corrected for" (Fricker 2007, Sec. 9). Further, truly listening to others and reconsidering 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 manoeuvring. One should never be stern in an opinion, as one's opinion is always a product of their biases and social 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 achieve, one must always allow their prejudices and biases the fluidity to change and adapt to the evidence surrounding them. Changing one's opinion is not black and white; it is a process that involves time and humility.

The Enlightenment era re-envisioned the definition and creation of true knowledge, which was heavily criticised and reinterpreted. Gadamerian hermeneutics sheds light on the incessant bias the Enlightenment had against 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 with respect to 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 by engaging with the opinions of 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 change of opinion is not the dissolution

of the ego but the continuation of education. Humility is the crucial factor in the opinion-changing process that stands as the fountainhead of good knowledge.

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