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Can Post-Truth Provide an Adequate Ethics for Social Epistemology? A Dialogue Between Gary Abbott and Steve Fuller

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Gary Abbott

The reason for my email concerns problems of morals. I am sure that you face this question a lot, but it is something that bothers me, and I can't seem to square it so would appreciate your insight/reflections on the matter. If one pursues a social epistemology and acknowledges the importance of the social construction of knowledge, I assume this also follows onto our moral stances: that the Holocaust and the killing of non-combatants and innocents is wrong; that acts of sexual violence are wrong merely follows from intersubjectively derived stances from a particular space in time. Indeed, as attested by history these now cherished stances were not the norm. I choose these examples deliberately, I—as most others—find these acts to be despicable.

However, I equally can't seem to accept an *a priori* naturalist approach to morals either. I look to history from my studies and see a diversity of morals, meanings, and interpretations. In effect, people such as Sam Harris who advance a universal approach to morals seem wanting.

The question, then, is one of values and hierarchy: under a social epistemology are we forced to accept apparently despicable views as mere deviations from our own? Does it mean that we should tolerate them, for its democratic merits? I reiterate that this is not a straw man, but I would like to reflect on how you have squared these problems. To me, racists, sexists, and other people adopt views that *should not* be tolerated. However, it seems to me one could easily say I have merely internalised a discourse, primarily a liberal one at that. In effect, my arguments are no more valid than the racists, and my attempt to erect a hierarchy of morals is merely an epistemic game.

Steve Fuller

You raise a profound set of issues, which we can only explore briefly in this space but which you—and anyone else interested in social epistemology—should return to in the future. That's because, if nothing else, moral judgements change over time and space. And that's for two reasons:

- (1) The more general reason is that our understanding of causation changes as we learn more and think about our relationship to the world differently;
- (2) The more specific reason is that our sense of justice changes as well, which has implications for how we think about whatever debts that the past, present and future might have to each other.

I originally considered the set of issues you raise in my second book, *Philosophy of Science and Its Discontents* (Fuller 1993). A couple of points raised in that book are relevant here. The first is that people's sense of the empirical and the normative are interrelated, perhaps even approximating Kant's 'ought implies can' principle. And while Kant's principle has been

often seen as pointing broadly in the direction of ‘moral naturalism’ (i.e., you shouldn’t require what you can’t do), people’s sense of their capacities have varied. This is even reflected in the history of so-called ‘evolutionary ethics’, which has enjoyed the endorsement of figures as ideologically diverse as Herbert Spencer, Piotr Kropotkin, John Dewey, Konrad Lorenz, Richard Dawkins and David Sloan Wilson. In *Discontents*, I argued for a ‘reflexive naturalism’, whereby naturalists regard themselves as subject to the sorts of changes that naturalists are inclined to notice in other humans and animals. I saw that position as a meta-historicism, which I then called ‘social scientific realism’. I wouldn’t necessarily call it that today, since the philosophical discussion has moved on. But I never thought of my position as strongly ‘relativist’. In fact, relativists in science and technology studies (e.g., Harry Collins and Michael Lynch) explicitly distance themselves from me. Over the years, I have come to believe that Karl Mannheim may have had a point when he called what he was doing ‘relational’ rather than ‘relativist’ sociology of knowledge. That would be a better name for what I’m doing.

But even if I’m not a relativist, what does what I’m saying mean for making moral judgements about the extreme cases you raise, ranging from the Holocaust to today’s various ethnically and sexually based forms of violence? Here I will make one ‘empirical’ and one ‘normative’ point.

The empirical point is that the moral fervour surrounding past atrocities naturally dissipates over time without active remembrance; hence the saying, ‘Time heals all wounds’. Memories fade, their bearers eventually die and meanwhile everyone generally feels the need to get on with each other. Norman Finkelstein is able to speak provocatively about a [‘Holocaust Industry’](#) because by the late 1960s (i.e., a generation after the Holocaust) people—including Jews—were already beginning to forget what had happened. In this respect, the success of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Committees in the early 1990s can be explained in terms of Apartheid’s perpetrators and victims being alive and available to settle their differences. There was no need for proxy agents, unlike many other cases of ‘restorative justice’ (e.g., reparations to descendants of slaves).

Here one can appreciate the jurisprudential principle of ‘statute of limitations’: If crimes—even ‘crimes against humanity’—aren’t prosecuted in a timely manner, then the parties are likely to have ‘moved on’ in one or more senses, perhaps altering the significance of the crime. Yet, at the same time, the step-change increase in humanity’s recording capabilities over the past fifty years has made it easier for memory to be reproduced, stored and accessed—as well as edited. My guess is that this will make it harder—rather than easier—to deliver justice in the future, as the evidential value of these recordings turn into bones of contention that then require litigation.

The normative point is that moral judgements require setting the standard by which the judgement is made. This is what philosophers since the Stoics have called the ‘criterion’, the terms on which a just verdict is delivered. It’s about finding a ‘level playing field’ so that both plaintiffs and defendants are treated fairly in a way that at the same time upholds the society’s moral order. Thus, the decision must not only be just but also appear to be just. But

there is no intrinsically right or wrong way to set the criterion. What matters is that the decision based on it has binding force over the society—at least until another opportunity arises to possibly reverse to decision. Of course, this presumes that the society’s members have authorized the decision-makers in their collective name.

It’s worth recalling that on a day-to-day basis Athenian law was adjudicated by randomly selected citizens. Indeed, the interchangeability of decision-makers was key to what passed for ‘democracy’ in Athens. (It also explains the relatively small fraction of the population eligible to be citizens!) But all of this works only if those officiating the authorizing institutions—be it a lottery or a constitution—are trusted. And the post-truth condition—like the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation—is about distrust of the officials, much more than of the institutions themselves. Thus, Luther and Calvin saw themselves as more Christian than the clerical officials in Rome. Similarly, the people today who distrust experts, politicians or journalists aren’t anti-science, anti-democracy or anti-news. And like the Protestant Reformers, the post-truthers speak in the name of empowerment and a higher form of justice.

Now, what does this all mean for the adjudication of morally extreme cases? Here I would just make a few observations. You don’t need to be a Holocaust denier to believe that justice is not necessarily served by indefinitely fixating on the enormity of the Holocaust’s occurrence. Whatever crimes against humanity are committed in the future—and they will be committed—are likely not to be Holocaust-shaped. This is largely to do with the ways in which the Holocaust has already altered our conceptions of genocide, internment camps, etc. Also, our improved recording capabilities (noted above) will make it difficult for an atrocity of that kind to go undetected for very long.

Put bluntly, people are already primed to look for the ‘next Holocaust’. But at the same time, we live in a world where many quite differently motivated groups are scoping out the ‘future of humanity’, and they typically involve some fairly radical policies that would alter if not abrogate the scope of human freedom, including in matters of consumption and reproduction. These groups may not proceed as violently as the Nazis—or the Communists, for that matter. Nevertheless, we shouldn’t assume that ‘crimes against humanity’ must happen violently. They could happen simply by starving people—and arguably that’s been happening for a long time, but we haven’t yet found the court whose judges are willing to make that verdict. Finally, we shouldn’t underestimate the power of ‘moving on’, especially given that notwithstanding all its fitfulness, liberalism is humanity’s overall direction of travel. We are entering a period where ‘liberalism’ has entered the sphere of identity politics, which has enabled ‘queer’ and ‘trans’ identities to flourish. This tendency poses a serious challenge to those who would rest claims to justice on ‘descendants’, since the descendants may have moved on to self-identify otherwise. In that respect, if liberalism succeeds, restorative justice will seem futile.

Gary Abbott

First, I join you in asserting that moral judgements change over time, for the two reasons highlighted:

- (1) Our understanding of causation changes;
- (2) Our sense of justice changes, which consequently feeds into interpretations of the past. In other words, history is not some given/linear shadow, but rather something continually re-interpreted and shaped with emergent ‘criteria’, as you mention.

However, I find two questions that emerge from your response:

- (1) One concerning verification;
- (2) Another concerning toleration, both looping back to my initial concern with a sociology of knowledge and morals.

First, on verification: where does your sociology of knowledge leave us with verification? For example, the events that transpired on January 6, 2021 at the US Capitol are ‘given’.

On the one hand it can be interpreted to be an insurrection filled with racist imagery a la Confederate flags; on the other hand, among some Republicans it was a form of democratic assertion in the face of elite corruption that ‘stole the election’. It is vital for us to be able to figure out which one is ‘true’. From my brief studies in the philosophy of science, I have been exposed to the problems surrounding a correspondence theory of truth, relying on ontological realism and an empiricist epistemology—assumptions that are far from free from flaws and inconsistencies. However, I felt somewhat dismayed at the idea of relinquishing a form of ontological realism, for it allows us to assert that events truly occurred in a certain [objective] way. This ‘objectiveness’ followed a bivalent truth principle and thus created a hierarchy of events: some things corresponded with reality and were accepted, those that did not were false and thus rejected.

Now, my largest concern would be the denial of atrocities. For instance, my recent dissertation considered the ongoing genocide of the Rohingya. External NGO consensus and (empirical) investigations by the UN appears to rally behind accusations of genocide; internal Buddhist agents, however, often deny this. The same also applied to deniers of the Holocaust. As it stands, a large portion of credence to heinous acts rests on empirical verification. It seems to me that a social epistemology is forced to relinquish this empirical verification through its inability to consistently adopt a view of objective truths, since it shifts truth from being a property of the world ‘out there’ and into rival epistemic communities that make truth claims. In other words, when adopting a social epistemology is one unable to assert objectively that x atrocity happened; instead, forced to accept a diversity of truth claims—even for genocide/other heinous acts?

Points of Clarity

My largest concern here is one of epistemic hierarchies. Under ‘orthodox’ ontology (say, ontological realism) and epistemology (empiricism) a bivalent truth principle resting on a correspondence theory of truth was able to erect hierarchies of truth—all claims were not equal. It seems to me, perhaps incorrectly[?] that a social epistemology is not able to continue this hierarchy of truths. Instead, it would be descriptive and assert all truth claims being equal, for each epistemic community has its own internal truth standards. From my view, this opens the way for the legitimate toleration of denial of ongoing genocides, hence leading to my second point below.

Second, is the problem of tolerance: tolerance of abhorrent views and acts, be it genocide, racism, sexism; and tolerance of alternative ‘interpretations of reality’. On the former, if morals are accepted as not being derived exogenously to social practice, and are thus not universal, then it follows that we are forced to accept a kind of normative democracy. Put simply, if our morals are merely socially constructed—which empirically seems to be the case—where does it leave us with toleration? This is not just a historical problem, instead we *contemporarily* have vastly different [competing] moral standards and expectations, and I cannot see a logical alternative to toleration following a social epistemology. After all, it follows that the stalker or the racist is not universally or objectively wrong, so much as they have internalised a different discourse of events or moral standards to my own.

In short, how would a social epistemology approach moral hierarchies? Are they necessarily collapsed and equal; or can one somehow *consistently* retain a moral hierarchy that rejects some actions under respective normative standards? On the latter point, on tolerating alternative ‘interpretations of reality’, it seems to me that a social epistemology is unable to reject certain claims to reality. If one shifts truth claims from the ‘world out there’, and into epistemic communities, then where are we left with tolerating other views? A more democratic and pluralist position would allow neo-Nazis to deny that the holocaust happened, or that 9/11 truly occurred.

Steve Fuller

Let me start with an observation. People who claim to be concerned with establishing the fact of some matter usually already think they know the facts, and for them the real issue is to get the dissenters to agree with them. So, in your examples, we are led to believe that there has been a Rohingya genocide and that the Holocaust and 9/11 occurred—and the quest for what you call ‘empirical verification’ is about getting the doubters—or at least those sitting on the fence—to see the truth of these claims. This may not be a flattering way to cast your argument, but I think it captures its rhetorical force as a problem you pose for social epistemology. (And I also say this as someone who judges your cited cases pretty much as you do.) I shall defer the ‘ontological realism’ question until the end. But the first point to make is that social epistemology is not in the business of vindicating your opening rhetorical gambit.

To understand where I'm coming from, the law draws an interesting distinction between 'inquisitorial' and 'accusatorial' (or 'adversarial') modes of adjudication. (It figured in my PhD, which compared scientific and legal forms of decision-making [Fuller 1985].) It's basically the difference between the state and the citizen being the origin of litigation. In inquisitorial systems, the state identifies a harmful incident and then proceeds to gather data, witnesses and suspects. In the course of inquiry, standards of evidence are established and burdens of proof are assigned to one or more suspects. In contrast, in accusatorial systems, there is no harm unless someone alleges that someone did something harmful to them. The state itself is not in the business of surveying society to see if harms are being done; rather it's the responsibility of individual citizens to raise a complaint. This helps to explain the relatively high burden of proof required for conviction (aka 'innocent until proven guilty').

The relevance of this distinction is that my version of social epistemology tends to approach matters from the inquisitorial side, which I think is in the spirit of Francis Bacon's original proposal for an experiment-driven scientific method. Bacon himself was King James I's personal lawyer, and while thoroughly Protestant, he was nevertheless a closet admirer of the Catholic Inquisition as a mode of inquiry. (Here you should think of Popper's keenness for falsifying hypotheses as a secular version of the reversed burden of proof favoured by the Inquisition: i.e., 'guilty until proven innocent'.) It follows that the standards of 'empirical verification' need to be set in a way that is neutral to the interested parties—which is not the same as neutral *tout court* or [Thomas Nagel's proverbial 'view from nowhere'](#)#. (What I mean is the sort of neutrality that leads us to believe in the fairness of juries.) Of course, this is easier said than done, especially in alleged 'crimes against humanity', where legal jurisdiction is difficult to establish such that any verdict might be recognized as binding by all the concerned parties. This is a problem routinely faced by, say, the United Nations or the International Court of Justice.

But the more general epistemological problem is to find a way to cast the terms for resolving these deep disputes that doesn't start by tipping the balance in favour of one of the contesting parties. This is the sense of 'tolerance' that our post-truth world demands. Basically, you need to imagine the conditions under which your opponent might be proven correct. Logical positivism had a strategy for dealing with the matter. It influenced much of twentieth century jurisprudence, starting with Hans Kelsen, who was in contact with the Vienna Circle, and including Herbert Hart in the UK and Axel Hägerström in Sweden. It presupposed—in the inquisitorial style -- that the state is the monopoly data gatherer and curator, the result of which is that all permissible arguments in court had to conform to what in early modern philosophy was called *phenomena bene fundata* ('well founded phenomena'). In many ways, it formalized traditional courtroom practice, which privileges eyewitness testimony over hearsay and permits re-enactments as long as they conform to the established facts of the case -- and allows opposing counsel to try to turn those facts to their client's advantage by presenting alternative accounts. This is the legal backdrop against which positivist science comes to be fixated with 'observation statements' and 'hypothesis-testing'.

While *prima facie* attractive, there are two big problems with this broadly positivist approach to the inquisitorial mode of adjudication:

Problem 1

The epistemic arbiter role reserved for the state (or science, backed by the state, *à la* Bacon) is losing salience in our post-truth condition. This is largely due to increasing levels of education in the citizenry and the democratization in society as a whole, all amplified by the increased access to information provided by the internet, whose economic model encourages mass participation. It enables everyone, at least in principle, to be their own gatherer and curator of data. And if they have enough social media followers, they can declare themselves a news outlet. This means that it becomes very difficult to reach that positivist ‘sweet spot’ of neutral observation statements because everyone has the capacity to present their ‘data’ as always already spun. For example, all sides may agree on the number of people called ‘Rohingya’ who have been persecuted and killed but their conceptualization as ‘Rohingya’ may be contested because it implies a narrative that puts the Myanmar government in a prejudicial light. The various incidents, which when collected look like genocide, may be explained independently of each other, thereby defusing that normative charge. I daresay that something similar would (might?) have been said by Nazis who were confronted with the enormity of the Holocaust. They would argue that it’s a figment of the prosecutors’ imagination. Yes, six million interned Jews may have been killed during the Second World War, but it happened for various reasons even if in roughly the same places. After all, this happened in wartime, and the Jews had been long regarded as Fifth Columnists, which provided the pretext for internment, the original meaning of ‘concentration camp’. Indeed, at the same time, it was practiced in the US vis-à-vis its Japanese residents, etc ... and so the Nazi argument would go.

Thirty years ago, [Bruno Latour published a book called ‘We Have Never Been Modern’](#). He wasn’t denying the events of the last four hundred years of Western history. He was denying that they add up to something that might be reasonably called ‘modernity’. I could easily see this happening even to the Holocaust in the future, especially as memories fade and new atrocities of a rather different cast come into view. Consider climate change. Most of the damage attributed to it is ‘unintended’, even when it could have been anticipated. But depending on the scale of climate devastation that comes to pass, negligence may overtake deliberateness as the source of greater moral evil. Of course, some accounts of the Holocaust already focus on the negligence of those who could have prevented or stopped it. However, were we to shift the paradigm case of ‘moral evil’ from the Holocaust to climate change, then the specifically ‘hatred’ aspect of the anti-Semitism that informed the Holocaust might come to lose salience.

Problem 2

More fundamentally, the judgements taken in a positivist regime may be inadequate to the cause of truth and justice in a more general sense. The law in its own way already recognizes this. Even if a judge or jury finds a defendant guilty as charged, the question of sentencing remains—and that can make all the difference in terms of the sort of precedent that the case sets for judges in the future. In this context, I would draw your attention to the liability-driven approach to adjudication championed by [Guido Calabresi and Douglas Melamed in a](#)

[landmark article of the 'Law & Economics' movement \(Harvard Law Review, 1972\)](#). Their basic idea is that rather than settling cases of harm simply by establishing who did what to whom, which stresses the sheer violation of property rights, a judge can think of the matter in more dynamic, second-order terms that addresses overarching issues of justice. Thus, if a company wants to build a factory that will pollute residential land, the court may permit the factory on the condition that the company provides some appropriate compensation to the dispossessed residents—especially if the company's failure to build the factory would leave the area, including those residents, demonstrably poorer. This is a better outcome than the judge simply deciding to prohibit the building of the factory. Moreover, such a compensation principle can also be applied *after* any damage has been done.

Taken together, (1) and (2) suggest that the terms of normative engagement are potentially always up for grabs. The presumption that property rights are inviolate and that people own their histories and self-understandings is effectively overturned. All these things now become contestable. This obviously places at a disadvantage those whose identities are bound up with, say, specific parcels of land or specific self-descriptions. Thus, the law is beginning to recognize 'cultural genocide', which is less tied to the protection of individual lives than to the protection of languages, customs and even entire ways of being in the world that may disappear simply because there is no longer any incentive to continue them. Western imperialism and globalized capitalism are usually implicated in claims relating to cultural genocide. In this respect, the post-truth condition carries on the work of postmodernism, which championed the idea of fluid and multiple identities as part of its more general critique of 'essentialism'.

Here I finally turn to 'ontological realism', which I find a philosophically elusive phrase. When postmodernists criticize 'essentialism', they mean the sort of view that, say, Jordan Peterson expresses with regard to gender identity. He believes that gender is a fixed and intrinsic feature of the person, and it is 'natural' (in a strongly normative sense) for people to act in accordance with that fact—and be recognized as such. The correspondence theory of truth actually came out of this view of the world, which in the Middle Ages was described as *adequatio intellectus ad rem* ('adequacy of mind to thing'). It is ultimately traceable to Aristotle and persists to this day in natural law theory, which the Roman Catholic Church upholds, as well as many conservative bioethicists. However, you may not mean something quite so metaphysically elaborate by 'ontological realism'. So let me offer a more modern alternative.

There is the idea, associated with Kant, of a 'mind-independent reality', which Bertrand Russell and others popularized in the twentieth century as the 'external world'. This way of thinking encourages the conclusion that there are 'facts of the matter' whose existence does not depend on whatever we might believe. From here one might be drawn either to outright scepticism or to push the frontiers of inquiry indefinitely beyond whatever happens to seem true. Clearly, science depends on the latter. However, there is some ambiguity about what 'mind-independent reality' really means. It appears that Kant himself, when calling this reality the *noumenon*, was thinking of a realm that might be apprehended by thought—but perhaps not human thought. In other words, 'mind-independent' may mean 'independent of minds like ours' but not independent of mind as such. At that point, the door is open to

idealism, which indeed was how Kant's immediate German followers interpreted him. From there, one can argue that human minds participate imperfectly in some higher collective, cosmic or divine mind—and that the idea of a reality 'independent' from our minds is a cognitive illusion generated by such imperfection. (Think of it as a secular way of capturing the theological idea that humans exist in a 'fallen' condition.) In that case, something called 'ontological realism' becomes unrecognizable, but questions of truth and justice start to merge, as human ignorance and human irresponsibility come to be seen as two sides of the same coin.

Gary Abbott

To conclude our brief exchange, I will begin by first highlighting a point of contention before moving onto what I think remains to be discussed.

First, a point of disagreement: One thing I struggle with is the causes you have identified for the post-truth condition that challenges the epistemic arbiter role of the state. You assert that competition over our current epistemic esotericism is derived from:

- 1) Increased levels of education in the citizenry;
- 2) Democratisation of society, amplified by;
- 3) Increased access to information provided by the internet whose economic model encourages mass participation.

However, I would argue (in a somewhat similar vein) that it seems to be more a consequence of the normativity surrounding individualism in the West. In other cultures, say in Eastern Asia, more hierarchical forms of society tend to be perceived as more stable. In the West, we tend to place emphasis upon the individual. It seems post-truth is merely the expression of an underlying normativity that cherishes the individual over hierarchical social forms that may tolerate epistemic esotericism, or 'the epistemic arbiter role reserved for the state'—as you put it. If our society placed more emphasis on social order than the aims and interests of the individual, I do not think we would be facing the post-truth problem. One can remain democratic while still placing normative emphasis on the group over the individual, as seen in East Asian countries like Japan and South Korea.

I feel that future conversation could address two areas.

First, one of my hopes for our conversation was to explore how a social epistemology feeds into moral stances. I probed that it did not seem to be consistent, on the one hand, to assert that knowledge claims are merely socially constructed (offering a form of verticality between truth claims) then, on the other hand, to be able to offer a form of moral hierarchy and reject some courses of action. I still feel that you have not offered a way for a social epistemology to be able to erect a hierarchy of morals. And yet, you and I both have our own hierarchies of morals, without the apparent ability to defend them.

Second, was to explore how your epistemology feeds into ontology. I had hoped we could directly probe the consequences of a social epistemology, how adopting it feeds into problems such as empirical verification. It remains unclear to me how anything can be empirically validated when we shift truth from a property of the external world and into competing epistemic groups. It does not follow to me that we can offer credence to heinous acts when there is no apparent means to detail their objective occurrence. When Kellyanne Conway declared there are ‘alternative facts’, it seemed to me to be less a move for democracy than it was a move toward the epistemic totalitarianism captured in Orwell’s *1984*. I would retain that it is an objective fact that Kellyanne Conway was wrong when she asserted that more people attended the Trump inauguration; it remains unclear to me how your epistemology can—if at all—include objectivity in an ontology that is derived from the social construction of knowledge. A future conversation could perhaps detail this sort of problem, something I hoped to allude to in the first paragraph of my second contribution.

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