Is Truth Contextual?

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I n her Presidential Address to the American Philosophical Association's Eastern Division, Linda Alcoff argued that philosophical debates ought to be reframed so as to reflect the social and political contexts which give rise to them if we are to avoid wielding philosophy as an instrument of epistemic oppression. In other words, philosophy should not consider the theories it produces separate from the material conditions of society. This is an admirable position for Alcoff to take. The common view that philosophy is aimed at objective, necessary truths lends itself to justification of oppression. Much of her address justifies this position beautifully.

Alcoff, unfortunately, goes wrong when she argues that it is problematic that "...our truth is universal rather than contextual..." (Alcoff, 2013). The problem is not that she criticizes universal truths, but that she positively advances the position that truth is contextual in a social sense. This form of contextualism is derived from a problematic naturalism that advocates a form of scientific pluralism. I will argue that Alcoff's position emerges from a misunderstanding of the role that the term "truth" plays within our language. It will be demonstrated that her conception of truth abstracts the term from its use as a predicate in ordinary speech and turns it into an object for philosophical investigation. Further, an analysis of the ordinary uses of "truth" supports Al-

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coff's fight against oppression better than a contextual under-
standing of truth.

Contextualism Defined

The contextualism that Alcoff advances is distinct from the
more common epistemic contextualism that philosophers such
as Keith DeRose argue for. While DeRose defines contextualism
as the claim that "what ordinary speakers will count as
'knowledge' in some non-philosophical contexts they will deny
is such in others" (DeRose, 2006), Alcoff defines contextualism in
terms of the social context in which philosophy takes place. The
former sort of contextualism deals with variation in what counts
as knowledge based on the needs of a given situation, while the
latter deals with social context in a broader sense.

What this means for truth, in Alcoff's view, is that "truth [is]
something constructed rather than discovered intact. Thus truth
is essentially historical and essentially contingent, and it is not
simply that our claims to truth must be historically contextual-
ized. There is no truth (even an inaccessible truth) which is uni-
versal, abstract or independent of the scientific process" (Alcoff,
1987). Hence, in her view truth is part of a greater historical
process and does not constitute an immutable form, but a contin-
gency. Truth, as it were, cannot be separated from the place of
the object of study or the social context in which the truth claims
are made.

Alcoff's form of contextualism is best understood in terms of
her understanding of why philosophers are wrong about truth.
She correctly notes that conceptions of objective truth can be
used as a method of oppression by being used to reject political
dissent and to disregard the experiences of oppressed individu-
als. Her response to this position is to accept that what is true
depends on the context in which the truth claim is made. Thus,
what is true for one group of people is not true for another.

A History of Alcoff's Naturalism

Alcoff's form of naturalism was deeply influenced by the work of Willard van Orman Quine. In the mid-twentieth century, Quine developed naturalism as a reaction to the logical positivists. To his thinking, the logical positivists' adherence to both empiricism and analytic statements was problematic. The cure for Quine was a rejection of the analytic-synthetic distinction and a naturalization of epistemology. By rejecting the analytic-synthetic distinction, Quine advanced a stricter empiricism than the logical positivists and was able to assert that there is no clear distinction between philosophy and science. (Quine, 1951) Further, by naturalizing epistemology, Quine made it the work of philosophy to engage scientifically with the "problem of bridging a gap between sense data and bodies," (Quine, 1973). On this view, whatever science's aim is, it is the aim of philosophy also.

It is in light of this that the philosophical works of Helen Longino, one of Alcoff's predecessors, make sense. She advocates an epistemology that is continuous with science. Longino modifies Quine's naturalism, giving a more complex view of scientific practice. Instead of unitary view of science, Longino advances a pluralistic conception of scientific practice (Kellert et al, 2006). What this means is that Longino accepts that science advances by using multiple frameworks that explain various phenomena in different ways. These frameworks are determined within a social context. What this means for philosophy is that, since it is continuous with science, all philosophical notions must be understood within a given context. Hence, Longino asserts a contextual empiricism that does not support universalist notions of objectivity (Alcoff, 2013). Rather, Longino accepts that there are multiple frameworks that give valid interpretations of reality and there are no good epistemic reasons to prefer one over the other.

Like Longino, Alcoff supports a local understanding of science. It is within a given context that scientific conclusions can be

understood and, as such, philosophy must be understood in terms of its socio-historical place as well. However if, as I suggest, this view of true knowledge doesn't accord with common sense, then the question that we must ask is which philosophical framework ought to be preferred, naturalism or ordinary language?

Naturalism Contra-Ordinary Language

To present an ordinary language critique of Alcoff's attempt to make truth contextual, the preference for a Wittgensteinian analysis over a naturalistic one must be substantiated. Wittgenstein's philosophy has been out of fashion since the late twentieth century. A complete survey of reasons why philosophers have rejected Wittgenstein is beyond the scope of this paper.[1] We shall only treat two objections: the continuity between science and philosophy, and Wittgenstein's supposed conservatism.

Wittgenstein's philosophical works share some common ground with naturalism, but these are only surface similarities. The main similarity is a context-dependent understanding of linguistic meaning. Beyond this, however, Wittgenstein and naturalism stand far from one another. In the course of explaining Wittgenstein's account of language and his philosophical method, the extent of their differences will become manifest.

Philosophical Investigations begins by presenting a conception of language that Wittgenstein wished to oppose with his new theory. According to this conception language is comprised of terms and these terms refer to objects. When written out, this view seems strange, but it is the very concept of language philosophers have used throughout the history of philosophy. Disproving this conception of philosophy is fairly straight forward. Wittgenstein does this through a thought experiment involving a very basic language that consists of object terms and pointing. Once one begins to add numbers, verbs, and other parts of speech which have no clear object related to them to this lan-

guage a pointing strategy quickly proves inadequate. There are no objects to point at.[2]

In contrast to this, the traditional portrait of language, Wittgenstein portrays language as diverse and dynamic. Words have meaning not by being related to objects, but by their *use* in language. This is where words obtain their initial significance. They are brought about by social discourse, by individual interactions. It is from the contrast between his and the traditional theories of language that Wittgenstein derives his understanding of the origin of philosophical problems.

Philosophical problems arise when it seems linguistically that we are referring to an object, but there is not one. To compensate for objects they cannot find, philosophers then create an "object" beyond the senses that can be found only by deep contemplation. This is most easily demonstrated by Plato's works. In the Platonic dialogues, Socrates questions his fellow Athenians about the meanings of terms like "courage" and "justice" while expecting to find a referent for them. He eventually went so far as to posit objects accessible only to philosophers called the "Forms" which relate to each of those terms. The history of philosophy is the history of reiterations of this misconception.

This is similar to the position of the naturalists because it recognizes that philosophy has, in some sense, constructed its knowledge. The difference is that naturalism commits the same error as traditional philosophies by failing to account for the distinction between speaking about the conceptual and speaking about the empirical. By rejecting that distinction, naturalism treats concepts as though they were objects.

The way in which positing that philosophy and science are continuous forces naturalists to treat concepts as though they were objects is that treating these concepts as scientific entails the assumption that they can be handled in the way that objects are. Science studies objects through empirical means. Making philosophy continuous with science requires philosophers to investigate philosophical issues through empirical means. They must search for natural facts to gather in support of their arguments.

Hence, given a naturalistic epistemological stance, philosophical concepts must refer to objects.

The problem with this is that concepts are not the sorts of things that are given to empirical investigation. For example, in order to determine if there is a married bachelor, one does not engage in empirical investigation of all bachelors to see if there is a married bachelor. If one is confused about this issue the correct way to deal with this is to remind them that a bachelor cannot be married by definition.

This sort of argument is what Quine attempted to end when he rejected the analytic-synthetic distinction. Quine's actual argument is unimportant here. What is important is that Quine never responded to Grice and Strawson (1956), or Carnap's (1963) criticisms, which casts doubt upon his conclusions. Further, Quine's rejection of the analytic-synthetic distinction does not necessitate that "there is not distinction between between *a priori* and empirical propositions" (Hacker, 2006). This is demonstrable by way of mathematics. Even if mathematics is empirically grounded, it is clear that, at a minimum, not all mathematical propositions can be disproved by empirical investigation.

Both of these points indicate that there is a difference between science and philosophy. Also, given that treating philosophy as continuous with science forces philosophy to treat concepts as though they were objects, it makes the link between the two undesirable even to the naturalist. The naturalist could misrepresent many of our concepts and the way we use them by attaching them to false referents. Thus, it seems clear that philosophy deals with conceptual issues, while science deals with empirical issues.

What this means then is that naturalism provides a false view of philosophical issues. Naturalism's scientism unintentionally creates objects where it finds concepts. It attempts to find ways to scientifically investigate what is best understood grammatically. Wittgenstein gives a conception of philosophy that cures these confusions and helps to clarify what it is that confuses us and leads us to ask the right philosophical questions.

Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy is essentially thera-peutic. It is the goal of philosophy to disabuse others of their phi-losophical leanings. This is done by showing them that they have been misled by their language to positing nonexistent objects. They have produced nonsense. But this is only the destructive part of Wittgenstein's philosophy.

The constructive aspects of his philosophy are his clarifica-tions about various grammatical distinctions. This has both the effect of dispelling notions that lead to philosophical confusions. This can have an impact on other subjects, which are often con-ceptually confused. An example of this what special relativity did for physics. When Einstein made the breakthrough that changed the course of his discipline, he did not do so through empirical investigation. Einstein recognized that the way in which scientists viewed the concepts of space and time was con-fused (Isaacson, 2007). By proposing that determinations of things like simultaneity depended on point of reference and that, as a consequence, space and time were relative, Einstein clarified the concepts themselves. By being confused by their grammar, physicists were engaging in what had become fruitless scientific endeavors. By clearing up the concepts, Einstein opened up new, more promising research.

The continuity between philosophy and science advocated by naturalism, if it were true, would constitute a reason to reject the work of Wittgenstein. This is due to Wittgenstein's strict ad-herence to the idea that philosophy deals only with conceptual confusions and not with empirical issues. Given the critique above, it is clear that Wittgenstein already has the better end of the argument.

Because of his conservatism, Wittgenstein has also been the victim of a tradition of misinterpretation. It is often asserted that Wittgenstein was a sort of political quietist who did not think that philosophy had any role to play at all in political life, so that anyone in agreement with his conception of philosophy can do nothing to correct epistemic injustices. Even Alcoff claims that "Wittgenstein... supplied the most extreme conclusion for this

trend of honoring the everyday: philosophy's ultimate aim, he said, is to leave everything just as it is" (Alcoff, 2013). Alcoff is, as many others do, referencing §124 of *Philosophical Investigations*. There is a strong tradition of simply quoting the middle of this paragraph and proclaiming Wittgenstein a quietist. However, upon examination of the *whole* paragraph, a different story emerges. The full passage is:

> Philosophy must not interfere in any way with the actual use of language, so it can in the end only describe it. For it cannot justify it either. It leaves everything as it is. It also leaves mathematics as it is, and no mathematical discovery can advance it. (Wittgenstein, 2009)

From the full passage it is clear that Wittgenstein is not claiming that philosophy and philosophers must leave the world as it is, but that philosophy must leave language as it is. If he meant everything, why then would he mention mathematics, specifically?

Further assertions about Wittgenstein's quietism arise when one analyzes biographical evidence. Norman Malcolm, one of Wittgenstein students, once related that Wittgenstein had written to him in relation to a political discussion "what is the use of studying philosophy... if it does not improve your thinking about the important questions of everyday life?" (Malcolm, 1958). What is important here is not the actual subject matter of philosophy. It seems clear that social issues are empirical and not within the domain of philosophical analysis. What is important is the influence that philosophy ought to have on one's thinking. Philosophy, then, should allow one to consider social problems more clearly due to the careful thinking that philosophical inquiry requires.

Wittgenstein's work in philosophy provides us with the tools needed to understand philosophical concepts and why they are confused. This work leads to a rejection of the creation of objects

from concepts as it was done by both traditional philosophy and through the scientism of the naturalists. This form of philosophical thinking provides the best manner for understanding truth.

The Meaning of Truth

Philosophical accounts of "truth" tend to be confused, creating grand theories of what is and what we can know that are prone to counter examples. What is the source of these confusions? The answer lies in how the term "true" is used in ordinary speech. When most philosophers talk about truth, they treat it as the name of an object to be understood by thought alone. What is meant by this is that one does not find "truth" in the world by empirical investigation, but by intuiting what "truth" must be. This is so even in the case of philosophers like Alcoff who think truth is contextual. Contextual truth is not spared the error of assuming a non-existent object by the understanding that what counts as true changes from social context to social context. Rather, this understanding of truth is reached by making an assumption about what sort of thing "truth" is, and then determining that it must change by context. The problem with this is that it abstracts the term "truth" from the way in which it is normally used and attempts to invent a deeper meaning for it. But words only derive their meaning from their function in communication, their place in an entire language. By taking the word out of context, philosophers are looking for objects where there aren't any. With the thought that philosophers treat truth as the name of an object in mind, the question is, does the term "truth" function as a name (that is, as a term with such a referent) in ordinary speech?

In J.L. Austin's paper "Truth", he gave a number of uses of "truth" in ordinary language. He takes three propositional forms to be the primary uses of "truth":

P1: S is true.
P2: It is true that S.
P3: Statement S is true.

The forms that Austin take as primary all reduce to variations of "S is true". What is striking about this form is that "true" functions as a predicate that applies to whole propositions. This result is important in terms of answering if the term "true" can function as a name.

As Gottlob Frege demonstrated, a predicate cannot function as a name. While Frege made the mistake of treating "True" and "False" as complex names, his analysis of propositions still holds. In his analysis, the reason that a predicable cannot be a name is because while a name picks out an object in the world, a predicable acts as a guide to a property. This is demonstrable by the fact that predicables come in contradictory pairs such as "S is true" and "S is not true", while names do not come in such pairs. Placing the negative participle in front of a name does not create the contradictory of that name, while doing the same to a predicable creates a contradictory pair (Frege, 1970).

However, the truth predicate is unique in that it applies to whole propositions and not just to names. Following Frege, it seems reasonably clear that predicables map their subjects onto truth-values. In other words, a predicable is something that can be true or false of a given name (Geach, 1962). But how does the truth predicate do the same for whole propositions? Since a predicable is something that can be true or false of a name, then it is clear that a truth predicate is either true or false of a whole proposition give that the whole proposition is either true or false. However, since the whole proposition is already true or false, this application of the truth predicate is redundant. In other words, applying the truth predicate performs no greater task in application to predicates then to emphasize the truth that is implicit in the assertion of a proposition. This deflationary understanding of truth demonstrates that truth predicates cannot be used as proper names such as "objective truth" and "their truth."

Alcoff has a response to this objection that "philosophers may deflate the meaning of truth, and define it by radically different terms, and yet it remains the single most important phi-

be used as proper names such as "objective truth" and "their truth".

Alcoff has a response to this objection that "philosophers may deflate the meaning of truth, and define it by radically different terms, and yet it remains the single most important philosophical norm by which we understand our discipline" (Alcoff, 2013). Her point here seems to be that even when we analyze "truth" in this manner, we still act as though we have access to universal truths that cannot be accessed except through philosophy. This is a fair criticism of analytic philosophy as it is most often practiced. Alcoff's mistake is to move from this objection to taking an opposing position to universal truths that derives itself from the same mistaken use of the truth predicate. The correct solution would have been to reject the idea that there is any object that truth refers to.

However, the ordinary uses of truth are more complex than given above. While it is clear that the truth predicate cannot be a name, this is not clear of other uses of "truth" without first analyzing them. There is another philosophically interesting use of true and that is the abstract noun "truth." Since we are examining ordinary uses of terms, the abstract noun "truth" seems to be problematic since it seems to directly contradict the above analysis. Thus, we need to look at how this term is used ordinarily and what it means with the context of an utterance.

Let us take the following examples:

U1: Tell me the truth.
U2: You can't handle the truth!
U3: They will never tell us the truth of what happened there.

At first glance, these uses of "truth" all seem to point to an object that is universally "the truth." This is a misleading picture and the source of philosophical confusions. The use of truth in the above cases all lend themselves to the same meaning. "Truth" in all of the above asserts that there are true propositions that agree with reality, with what is the case. It would be a mistake to assume that these propositions constitutes "the truth" for

the same reasons as enumerated above. However, there is one other use of truth that is philosophically interesting that needs to be looked at in further detail.

Truth and Scientific Theories

A final use of truth that is of interest because it is *not* used in ordinary language; the scientific use of the term. Naturalistic epistemologies tend to focus on science and its relation to truth. This has been especially true of Longino, who has written extensively on scientific pluralism. How is this specialized notion of truth used in a scientific sense related to the ordinary notion of truth? An analysis of naturalism will prove to be useful in answering this question.

As Longio argues, "the multiplicity of approaches that presently characterizes many areas of scientific investigation does not necessarily constitute a deficiency" (Kellert *et al*, 2006). This understanding of science fits well with the work of Thomas Kuhn on the history of scientific progress.[3] In both cases, it can be seen that different conceptions of scientific practice as socially constructed can be correct while having substantial theoretical disagreements. Kuhn's famous example is that Ptolemaic astronomy and Copernican astronomy both give accurate predictions while positing a completely different view of reality (Kuhn, 1996). Alcoff relies on this understanding of science when she criticizes the way that that western cultures' conviction in the universality of scientific knowledge is notable for its refusal to accept the science of different cultures (Alcoff, 2013). This sort of rejection is a rejection of others' reasoning, without even attempting to check the validity or the success of their practices.

Further, certain properties are explicable in the context of one framework and not another. For example, the incommensurability of certain aspects of quantum mechanics with relativistic cosmology is not easily solved by looking for a unifying theory such as string theory. And even if string theory were substantiated, there is no guarantee that it would provide supe-

rior testable hypotheses to the pluralistic understanding of physics presented before.

With this understanding of science in mind, an important question comes to mind: what role does truth play in scientific hypotheses? It is not the same sort of truth that is ordinarily expressed. This is due to the fact that different scientific theories can have similar explanatory value, but one is considered true and the other is not. An example of this comes from special relativity and Lorentz ether theory. Both these theories gave the same testable predictions, but Einstein's theory was preferred. There was no reason for this beyond simplicity in scientific theories. This means that to call a scientific theory true is not redundant, but provides new information about the theory.

This new information is that the scientific theory gives rules for understanding the world which are more successful than not. Scientific theories do not seem to assert propositions that can be true or false, but rules that provide a way to model reality. Thus we can see a sense in which truth can be contextual. When one is judging the validity of scientific frameworks, one can conclude that a given framework is true in a given social context. Ptolemaic astronomy and Copernican astronomy can both be true in the sense that they both provide a model of reality that can produce accurate predictions for those employing them.

From this, it can be determined that in an ordinary sense of the propositions being true or false, scientific propositions are not capable of being either true or false. Scientific propositions are rules that model reality. The sort of truth asserted by scientific propositions is not truth in any ordinary or intuitive sense. It is a specialized use of the term that is distinct from the other uses of the term.

It is from this analysis that the problem of scientism within naturalism becomes manifest. The problem is this, it appears that the naturalists take the scientific conception of truth and impose it on all uses of the term. This illegitimately extends the scientific meaning of truth to ordinary uses, making all truth contextual in this same manner. This treats the concept true as though it were

an object. The naturalist has engaged in an empirical investigation as to what counts as true in a scientific sense. Thus, they have come to understand the "true" meaning of "true". Hence, it can be seen that they have made the mistakes mentioned above; they have created an object where there is none.

<u>Truth and Oppression</u>

From this analysis of truth, we have, in a roundabout way, come to a solution to the problem of western impositions of universalism. If we understand truth not as an object, but as a predicable or an assertion that there are true propositions that agree with reality, then we need not act as though we are the purveyors of capital-T "Truth." That conception of truth is derived from treating truth as an object. The Wittgensteinian therapy for the problem is to reject that theory. By doing this it is possible to completely reject the philosophical notion of "Truth."

However, the wrong way to deal with this issue is to assert the opposing claim. Theories peddling relative truth and contextual truth make the same mistake of treating "truth" as an object of philosophical study. This understanding of truth is inherently oppressive. This is not due to an express desire to oppress, but due to treating philosophical concepts as supersensible objects that are accessible only to the philosopher. Even those like Alcoff, who do not accept that contextual truth should be understood only by the philosopher (Alcoff, 2013), are implicated in this. It is due to the nature of the philosophical notions themselves, and not to the philosopher asserting them, that the philosophical notions must create divisions. If the idea is accessible through thought or intuition alone, then the idea is accessible only to those who have the time to focus on refining their thought. It is a self-aggrandizing understanding of truth for philosophers to hold.

Another reason that these philosophers' own practices are oppressive. This oppression comes out due to the philosophical requirement that the "vulgar" be lesser. Comments throughout history have made it clear that most philosophers look down on ordinary modes of understanding and speaking, but this has

been made even more explicit since the work of Wittgenstein. In rejecting Wittgenstein philosophers must also reject the idea that ordinary speech is okay. Instead philosophers must look down and tell the masses that their method of speech is vague and that only by transcending it through thought alone can one understand what "Truth" signifies.

Naturalists look as though they do not do this. They make no claims to the "Truth" and they do not claim that ordinary speech is completely vague. What they do is much more subtle, but is nonetheless oppressive. They take the notion of "Truth" and claim it to be false, they then assert the opposite, that "truth" is contextual and that *their* understanding of "truth" can lead to dialogue and understanding between frameworks. This is their cure for epistemic oppression. The problem with this is that it is a false solution. Because it pays heed to others' situations but still claims superior apprehension of "truth," it allows philosophers to feel as though they are doing something to treat epistemic discrimination without actually treating epistemic discrimination. The only sort of oppressive tendency that talking across frameworks is likely to cure is interpersonal prejudices. However, the root cause of oppression, the conviction that one's own position is superior, remains the same and the system remains oppressive.

What, then, is the result of adopting a Wittgensteinian stance on epistemic oppression? The result is concluding that philosophy is not the sort of thing that can treat oppression. Insofar as philosophy is useful in these areas, it is useful for improving one's thinking about the issues. As it is traditionally practiced, however, it is epistemically oppressive in its own right. Philosophy in a Wittgensteinian does not claim to be able to cure oppression; however, it *can* claim not to contribute to this oppression.

It is the role of activists and the revolutionaries to resolve issues of oppression. These are the people who can fight conditions that actually exist within a society. It is only from below, and not as a gift from above, that oppression can be ended. But do not let it be said that philosophers must be apolitical. There is

nothing stopping the philosopher from being an activist, also. These are not mutually exclusive. The philosopher must merely remember that it is not her studies that cure social ills, but those fighting their material conditions.

<u>Conclusion</u>

Philosophical theories about truth are riddled with confusions. Alcoff's social context theory is no different. While her attempt to understand and deal with epistemic oppression by recognizing the influence of social contexts upon scientific knowledge is well-conceived, her application of this method to truth and other philosophical concepts is mistaken. By analyzing truth as it is used in ordinary language, we can move past theories of truth fashion less oppressive philosophical stances. It will also help us to understand that we must move beyond philosophy to right epistemic and other injustices. "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it" (Marx, 1970).

Notes

1. Besides naturalism's critiques, the two main reasons to reject Wittgenstein's work are presented in Ernest Gellner's critique of Wittgenstein's *Words and Things* and in Saul Kripke's seminal work *Naming and Necessity*. Gellner's work, famed for its extraordinary incivility and unreliability, has been critiqued thoroughly by Uschanov(2006).
2. Other proofs that not all words refer to objects exist. One by Gottlob Frege will be used later in this paper. Other proofs can be found in (Geach, 1962) and (Davidson, 2005).
3. This is true in spite of Longino's critique of aspects of Kuhn's work. What is important is the commonality between the two when it comes to differing scientific paradigms.

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