

Discussioni / Book Symposia

Right, Knowledge, Truth

Comments on Lani Watson's, *The Right to Know*

Do We Need Epistemic (or Alethic) Rights?

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Abstract: The notion of epistemic rights (rights related to knowledge) faces a radical objection, advanced by anti-democratic approaches in epistemology. They claim inequality in the distribution of knowledge is not wrong; rather, epistemic liberalism, i.e. the idea that 'epistemic goods' could and should be available to everyone, is the main cause of the current information crisis. I suggest this and similar objections rely on a misunderstanding about the role of truth in knowledge (and in social life), then I sketch the truth theory which grounds the idea of 'alethic rights' (rights related to truth) and can also support epistemic rights disproving this and similar objections.

Keywords: Epistemic rights, Alethic rights, Theories of truth.

Lani Watson's research about *epistemic rights* (ER hereafter) is very close to the theory of *alethic rights* (AR) that Maurizio Ferrera and I have developed recently¹, so we may have many things to say about her proposal. I focus here only on one point: do we really need ER (or AR)? If we do, how is this need grounded (justified, explained)?

I advance a 'Nietzschean' (in loose sense) provocation: maybe we do not need specific rights concerning knowledge or truth, maybe all our problems come from thinking that we do. It is a position I do not share, evidently. But there are reasons in favour of it, and I believe that this and similar perplexities about ER or AR can be dispelled if we make our ideas clearer about the role of what we call 'truth' in political and juridical contexts.

In her comment to the AR theory², Watson has noted that for her the 'alethic' (A) domain is part of the 'epistemic' (E), while for us the relation is opposite, so there is

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a certain primacy of AR over ER. In my reply³ I have explained our reasons, now I think that some more details can be useful. I claim that when we speak of ‘the right to know’ (in Watson’s sense), we in fact speak of ‘the right to truth’; but we do not refer to ‘truth’ as it is most usually intended by contemporary epistemologists, rather to the notion of *aletheia*. As I specify, the use and meaning of this concept imply *realism*, i.e. the reference (of sentences or beliefs) to an independent world, as well as *scepticism* i.e. the attempt to exclude what is false or untruth. I believe that many controversies and perplexities about the role of E-facts in politics depend on forgetting at least one of these two capital features of cognition and their joint expression in the concept we call ‘truth’. But this double character of the aletheia is namely what makes us think that we ought to take care of knowledge, and to formalize this care in terms of rights.

I first summarize Watson’s view and I briefly present the Nietzschean objection. Then I sketch the truth theory which underlies AR and, I believe, can disprove some (more or less radical) resistances against the idea of ER (or AR).

1. E-rights and their enemies

Watson’s book begins by the so-called ‘information crisis’, a typical concern of social epistemologists:

There are few, I think, who would argue that the epistemic dimension of our lives doesn’t matter. This is perhaps especially so in recent years when the threats of widespread misinformation, distortion and obfuscation of the truth, deception and outright lies have become a particularly potent topic of public concern (p. 100).

In practice, we are aware that ‘knowing matters’ and we should take care of it (p. 102). Watson specifies that what ‘matters’ is not knowledge as such, but what epistemologists intend by ‘E’, i.e. “a catch-all term for a range of states or goods, including belief” (p. 13). The further passage is that the exercise of our cognitive activities provides E-goods (powers, intellectual and practical resources), which can be damaged or dispossessed, and are not equally distributed. So it is perfectly reasonable to elaborate our concern in terms of rights because we risk being systematically deprived of “goods such as information, knowledge and truth”, and ER are typically “those rights that protect and govern the quality, distribution and accessibility of epistemic goods” (p. 23).

1.1. The language of rights

The first premise is generally accepted: unquestionably, we have problems concerning knowledge. But that these problems involve the activation of specific rights is more arguable. In the last chapter Watson advances three “good reasons” for identifying ER “as a distinct and unified class of rights”: the (unusual) expression “names and identifies a feature of our moral landscape” with clear political impact; it allows for “the identification of previously unrecognised or underappreciated harms”; and it gives

“more effective protections against those harms, in the form of education, regulation and legislation” (p. 91).

In deepening the three reasons Watson also presents other motivations, which enlighten the methodological impact of what she calls “the language of rights”. To understand and describe “the moral landscape of the twenty-first century” ignoring or underrating the role of epistemic harms, offences, injuries and damages, “is like trying to understand a physical landscape without a map”, it means “missing important topological features” (p. 92). “We still lack the conceptual resources and the vocabulary to make sense of and articulate the Information Age”, and ER provide us with this new vocabulary (p. 97). Then we have a rhetoric motivation: “the power and political force of rights language is one of the most compelling reasons to adopt it in the epistemic domain” (p. 99).

Altogether, we would say that the language of rights *retro-acts* over our paradigms in epistemology (and possibly in political science), imposing some relevant changes. It joins domains we are used to conceive separately (epistemology and politics, theoretical and practical considerations), and favours a normative approach in political philosophy, specifically involving a *bottom-up normativity*, from people who need to know to the institutions and agents who should satisfy this need (as Ferrera specifies in his contribution to this issue). In D'Agostini-Ferrera, 2019 (pp. 13-15) we have suggested that the first of these changes regards our ideas about ‘truth’. We need to re-stipulate the notion of truth, not only, I think, to ground AR, but also to defend the relevance of the ‘E-goods’ mentioned by Watson.

1.2. *Anti-democratic epistemology*

Watson clarifies the reasons in favour of ER but does not specifically discuss the reasons *against*. One could say we already have norms which protect us, for instance, from frauds and manipulation, even if they do not involve the postulated notion (‘epistemic’). The activation of E-measures could be illiberal: nobody is entitled in principle and a priori to select correct from incorrect information, truth from falsity. The right to know may conflict with other rights or principles, such as privacy, or free speech., etc.

There are counter-objections (some of them are sparsely present in the book). But a special and possibly more decisive argument against ER (or AR) is the challenge of anti-democratic epistemology. It is a classical challenge for epistemic liberalism, and for any liberal conception of reason, and it can be formulated as follows: the claim that everyone has ‘a right to know’ is the problem and not the solution of E-crises. I have called this provocation ‘Nietzschean’⁴, but we can find it in a variety of positions. Watson says that ER “arise within and are bound by epistemic communities comprised of individuals with different epistemic abilities, opportunities and duties” (p. 100), but is this inequality wrong? Ultimately, for Plato or Aristotle, not everyone has the right to know because not everyone knows how to use their knowledge (information, belief, truth) in correct ways.

Epistemic arguments against democracy ought not to be underrated⁵. The democratization of knowledge (of E-goods) provided by digital means can be reasonably identified as the first cause of the informational crisis. In principle everyone can know, everyone can believe to know and has the right to express their belief. The digital turn conveys a systematic mismatch between the impressive amount of information we receive and our usual means of knowledge. The adoption of selective procedures is distorted, randomly performed, or submitted to the biased action of big data algorithms.

This explains the amazing irrationality of some regions of public communication, and the fortune of well-known phenomena: echo chambers, conspirationisms, flatearthisms, denialisms etc. At the end of the book Watson mentions Covid pandemic, to confirm the impact of E-facts over people's health and life, but the example can work against the idea of ER. The diffusion of scientific contents available to everyone, from the widest variety of sources, famously generated an 'infodemic' (as it has been labelled by the WHO), with explosive effects on the management and distribution of E-goods.

2. *A very short theory of truth*

Briefly, Watson underrates what philosophers in the tradition have variously stressed: that the E-goods play an ambiguous role in human life. Without knowledge (truth, information, belief) we cannot live, they are the necessary ('transcendental') conditions of our survival in the world. But they often deceive us, we think to know while we don't, we believe to have truth while we have false or imprecise information, and our beliefs are generally incomplete, they are simply half-truths (what we call 'opinions'), yet we treat them (we are forced to treat them) as it were complete and unquestionable truths. The AR theory we have proposed does not elude the classical tension between E-values and democracy but offers a different diagnosis of the problem. What is wrong is not democratized knowledge as such (if anything, it is a historical-evolutionary fact, there is no point in trying to resist it), but democratized knowledge *without truth*, without a shared awareness concerning the nature and role of this concept in our private and public life.

To see that 'truth' is what is at stake, consider the basic question: do really people need to know? The cases examined by Watson in the book confirm they do, but what do they need, in needing knowledge? The reasonable answer is that they need not to be deceived or deceive themselves. Not by chance, in justifying ER Watson mentions the evidence of "widespread misinformation, distortion and obfuscation of the truth, deception and outright lies", all cases in which truth fails or is violated. We may say that truth is what *valorizes* knowledge, what makes of the E sphere a generator of values and goods. But what do we mean by 'truth' in this case?

For Watson, 'having truth' is only one of the E-goods, and I suppose she intends by this something as 'having the knowledge of how things stand'. A similar notion apparently diminishes the role of truth because we do not always 'have truth' in this sense. However, we do not only intend this, when we are concerned with truth in

political contexts; for instance, when we complain about the 'post-truth' condition of public debates, or, as Watson says, are worried by omitted, distorted or misleading information. Clearly we mean something different, or rather, something more.

2.1. *The non-concealment*

A first intuition is given by Heidegger, in his short essay of 1943 *On the Essence of Truth*. He stresses the etymological meaning of 'aletheia' as 'non-concealment': by 'truth' (T) we mean the removal of the *lethe* (the oblivion, the obscurity); something is concealed (unknown) and is to be revealed⁶. The concept so involves a *double* negation: the negation-concealment of facts and the negation-revelation of what was concealed.

We can draw a consequence that Heidegger does not consider, that 'T' is a *sceptical* concept, it is used within a *skepsis* (i.e. research, discussion, inference). See what happens in usual cases when 'T' enters our language or thought:

- we do not think about whether an assertion (sentence, proposition, statement etc.) is true or not, if we do not have *doubts*;
- we use 'T' or think about T when we have to *convince* someone that flat-earthism is wrong, or that vaccinations may have collateral effects, but we'd better get them;
- we use 'T' when we want to *infer* from some premises, taken as true, a conclusion, supposedly true as well;
- we use 'T' when we want to *reveal* the crimes of governments, police, institutions or authorities in general.

All this suggests that T plays an inferential, discussive, critical role. Accordingly, we may assume that the need for T, the right to T, and also the ER (as Watson intends them), are all expressions of a more general and grounding need for non-concealment.

2.2. *Realism*

The other feature I have mentioned, i.e. *realism*, confirms the *primacy* of the A-dimension in human life. Ultimately, 'this is true' has always meant what Plato specified in *Crat.* 385c: *this is how things stand*. It is what I suppose Watson intends, and notably, it is a *realist* but not strictly *correspondentist* definition (no special isomorphism word-world is required). It postulates that to have truth we must have a world of facts or things (*onta*) 'independent' of our language or thought.

Contrary to what some epistemologists believe, this basic realism is not incompatible with the idea of non-concealment, rather, it is *implied* by it. That something is concealed or unknown postulates that *there is* something; rather, something *there must be*. A realism of this kind is nowadays advanced by *truthmaker* theories, whereby if a certain 'p' is true, then there must be some entity in the world which makes 'p' true.

We can complete the picture by saying that when we deal with T we refer to the world, and with this we express the need for excluding-rejecting falsity or untruth. The realistic and sceptical nature of T are joined. We can perfectly be truthmaker theorists while accepting the 'non-concealment' implied by the use of T.

2.3. *Two theses*

The T-theory we obtain from the notion of aletheia so includes only two theses

The Independence Thesis: the subsistence of an independent (though not inaccessible) reality

The Exclusion Thesis: if ‘p’ is T, then ‘not p’ (and all opposed-contradictory theses) must be excluded-rejected

Both have been infinitely revised and discussed in the contemporary ‘jungle’ of truth theories. Here we conceive them as implied by T as *aletheia*: the former tells us that to have T you need to have facts working as truthmakers; the latter gives us the sceptical value of T as a concept naming the non-concealment.

Importantly, the former explains the special and pervasive *power* of T over our knowledge and beliefs. The reference to an independent reality reveals that T is a universal ‘possibility condition’, because we always (more or less knowingly) confront our beliefs with a world of facts, and our interaction with facts of the world (hard fact, natural facts, social facts, artifacts, soft – intentional – facts) dominates our life. Being dispossessed or deprived of this relationship is the primary damage or injury we might undergo, in knowledge, but also in life. The ‘vital’ importance of T so may appear evident: *we actually live, think and act, in an alethic world, whether we like it or not.*

The realism implicit in the notion of ‘A’ makes of it a capital principle not only of the entire E-sphere, but of any other ‘sphere’ of human life. The virtues and goods, rights and duties released by ‘T’ (as aletheia) are not only confined to the area of cognition. They are also *practical*, because if our relationship with reality is threatened, and we are deprived of the sceptical-reflexive resources to see this, we cannot live, decide and act.

2.4. *The right to truth*

My aim here is not to defend the preferability of the A-theory over rival T-theories, but to check whether it can explain the role of truth (and E-facts) in the practice of justice. The reference to the ‘right to truth’ (RT) can offer some further clarifications. It is not a case that the ER have never been the focus of political activism, while the RT has become a critical topic of international justice and a crucial factor in the processes of democratization, after the Second World War and later in South America and in South Africa. RT cases are the most evident cases in which a bottom up ‘alethic’ concern –realistic and sceptical – has arisen in political and juridical language.

Manfredo Velasques was tortured and killed by the police services of Honduras in 1981. After a long and troubled trial, especially promoted by his sister (Brunner, 2016, pp. 67-72), the truth of this brutal murder was finally established and the government was condemned, so *Velasques vs Honduras* launched the RT as a new principle of international justice. Did Manfredo’s sister need to *know*? In fact, she already ‘knew’ how things went. Her right is called ‘RT’ because with ‘T’ as aletheia we do not only mean the knowledge of facts, we do not only mean to have consistent or efficacious knowledge/beliefs, we also mean the positive and public disapproval of falsity. In wanting

truth we want to denounce and reject obscuration, coverups, manipulations of facts whose effects are not only morally but also practically destroying for the associated life. Our need for- or right to- truth, so intended, is to be satisfied also because the reliability of the institutions, for us and other people, depends on this satisfaction.

We have tried to organize these basic needs, in a system of six AR. While the first of them is the right to know-believe correctly (so formalizable in terms of ER), the others are related to the impact of the aletheia on human life, and the last one asks for the 'cultural turn' we need to ground all the other AR (as suggested in 1.1).

Notes

¹ Watson, 2021a and 2021b; D'Agostini-Ferrera, 2019; D'Agostini, 2021a and 2021b.

² Watson, 2021b.

³ D'Agostini, 2021b.

⁴ Nietzsche was not strictly an epistemic (or alethic) nihilist, but he famously launched the program 'the will to truth needs a critique' (The Genealogy of Morality, III, 24), which inspired the most radical anti-alethic conceptions of democracy (as in Vattimo, 2014).

⁵ A recent version is the 'epistocratic' strategy proposed by Brennan, 2016.

⁶ Heidegger, 2008, especially pp. 130-135.

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