

TRUTH, MORAL RIGHTNESS, AND JUSTIFICATION:  
A HABERMASIAN PERSPECTIVE ON DECOLONIZING  
THE UNIVERSITY

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**ABSTRACT.** In this paper, Annina Leiviskä examines the moral, political, and epistemic claims of the social justice movement known as “decolonizing the university” from the perspective of Jürgen Habermas’s distinction between objective and normative validity and the respective notions of truth and moral rightness. Leiviskä challenges the view, held by some representatives of decolonization, that the normative and epistemic claims of the movement are inseparable from each other and suggests that evaluating the justification of the movement requires holding these claims at least analytically distinguishable. She argues that while the moral and political claims of “decolonizing the university” find strong justification through Habermas’s discourse morality, its epistemic claims, especially the rejection of shared standards of knowledge, might have epistemically problematic consequences. Accordingly, Leiviskä suggests here that the epistemic justification of decolonization is conditional on the acceptance of shared epistemic standards — the pragmatic truth concept and the criterion of impartiality — which she develops in the paper on the basis of Habermas’s pragmatic theory of truth and rational discourse as a model of justification. Finally, she proposes that the implications of these criteria for practices of higher education and the curriculum should be determined through an open and unconstrained discussion by the members of an inclusive university community.

**KEY WORDS.** decolonization; university; Jürgen Habermas; truth; moral rightness; validity

INTRODUCTION

Western universities in the United States, the UK, and Europe are currently facing increasing requirements to diversify the curricula of different disciplines and the scientific canons and traditions in which these curricula are rooted. The purpose of this diversification is to intervene in the inequalities and practices of marginalization that have been associated with the production of knowledge, as part of a broader cultural and institutional transformation toward social justice. This diversification does not only concern the inclusion of a more diverse array of scholarship, voices, and perspectives into the curriculum or into the scientific canons and practices; rather, many scholars have called for a comprehensive *decolonization* of the university.<sup>1</sup> Decolonization, in this context, refers to a profound transformation of what is considered to be knowledge, how that knowledge can be determined and by whom, and how it should be taught in institutions of higher education. Decolonization is rooted in the idea that knowledge is inseparable from power and has been among the most effective means of sustaining divisions of power both locally and globally. Therefore, bringing about social and global justice is perceived to be inseparable from epistemological transformation.<sup>2</sup>

1. See, for example, Binaya Subedi, “Decolonizing the Curriculum for Global Perspectives,” *Educational Theory* 63, no. 6 (2013): 621–638.

2. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Decolonising the University: The Challenge of Deep Cognitive Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017).

At the same time, contemporary societies are experiencing a broad crisis of knowledge and truth associated with the present “post-truth condition.”<sup>3</sup> Fake news, conspiracy theories, and the purposeful spread of mis- and disinformation have made it increasingly difficult for citizens to recognize reliable sources of knowledge and to discern between facts and opinions. The public trust in scientific institutions and experts is steadily decreasing, leading to citizens’ growing reluctance to follow public, science-based incentives.<sup>4</sup> With these phenomena in view, while many academics support the quest for social and global justice associated with decolonization and other movements that are gaining ground in today’s universities, many also believe that institutions of higher education should focus on reinforcing students’ awareness of shared standards and methods of knowledge formation and should foster students’ science literacy and trust in scientific research and expertise.

Against this background, my aim in this article is to examine the justification of decolonizing the university from the perspective of Jürgen Habermas’s concepts of truth and moral rightness, and the associated division between objective and normative validity. While Habermas’s discourse ethics is rather broadly discussed and used in the context of educational research, his pragmatic theory of truth and the differences between truth and rightness have received little consideration among philosophers of education. In this paper, I use Habermas’s distinction between objective and normative validity as an analytical framework for examining the justification of the different types of validity claims involved in decolonizing the university.

Drawing on this distinction, I challenge the view often presented in the context of decolonization that the normative claims of social and global justice advocated by the movement are inseparable from its epistemic aims, especially the idea that, in consequence, there is a need for radical epistemological transformation. I suggest that these normative and epistemic claims should be held as in principle distinguishable from each other because they refer, at least in part, to different domains that depend on different criteria of validity. What follows from this distinction is that claims that are justifiable from a normative perspective may not be equally justifiable from an epistemic point of view. I further suggest that this distinction is particularly important in the context of contemporary universities

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3. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the concept of post-truth as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping political debate or public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/58609044?redirectedFrom=post-truth#eid> (accessed March 18, 2023).

4. Sarit Barzilai and Clark A. Chinn, “A Review of Educational Responses to the ‘Post-Truth’ Condition: Four Lenses on ‘Post-Truth’ Problems,” *Educational Psychologist* 55, no. 3 (2020): 107–119.

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because it enables recognizing where, and how, different aims of the university institution are in conflict with each other, and how such conflicts might be resolved in a productive way.

Furthermore, I develop a normative defense of decolonization through Habermas's discourse morality and argue for an egalitarian inclusion of previously marginalized voices in determining the institutional rules and educational practices of the university. However, concerning the epistemic claims of decolonization, I reject the idea of incommensurability of different knowledge systems and argue that all epistemological positions should be subject to shared standards of knowledge. Accordingly, I suggest that the justification of the epistemic claims of decolonization is conditional on the acceptance of two epistemic criteria that I develop on the basis of Habermas's philosophy: the pragmatic criterion of truth and the criterion of impartiality, the latter deriving from the preconditions of rational discourse as a model of justification. Whereas the first, the pragmatic truth criterion, provides an epistemic standard for disciplines that exclusively deal with the "objective world"<sup>5</sup> in a Habermasian sense, the criterion of impartiality offers an epistemic standard also for disciplines whose subject matter of inquiry is the social world. I leave open the question to what extent and how these criteria should be employed on the level of the *curriculum*; this, in my view, must be decided by the university communities themselves through a careful consideration of the relative weight and importance of the different aims of the university institution.

The paper is structured as follows: I start with a brief introduction to decolonizing the university and decolonization as a broader theoretical approach. I then address two ideas that arise with the epistemic claims of decolonization, which I find problematic: the diversification of standards of knowledge and the fusion of the normative and epistemic claims of decolonization. Then I move on to introducing Habermas's distinction between objective and normative validity and the associated concepts of truth and moral rightness. The section that follows addresses the relevance of Habermas's approach to decolonization and also introduces my central arguments. The final section offers some concluding remarks.

#### DECOLONIZATION AND DECOLONIZING THE UNIVERSITY

The movement known as "decolonizing the university"<sup>6</sup> or "decolonizing the curriculum"<sup>7</sup> first gained public awareness through university protests, especially the Rhodes Must Fall protest in Cape Town, South Africa, in 2015, and the subsequent protests it sparked at UK and U.S. universities. These protests,

5. Jürgen Habermas, *Truth and Justification*, trans. Barbara Fultner (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 254.

6. de Sousa Santos, *Decolonising the University: The Challenge of Deep Cognitive Justice*; and Gurminder K. Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial, and Kerem Nişancıoğlu, eds., *Decolonising the University* (London: Pluto Press, 2018).

7. Subedi, "Decolonizing the Curriculum for Global Perspectives"; Neema Begum and Rima Saini, "Decolonising the Curriculum," *Political Studies Review* 17, no. 2 (2019): 196–201; and Marie Charles, "Effective Teaching and Learning: Decolonizing the Curriculum," *Journal of Black Studies* 50, no. 8 (2019): 731–766.

and the broader university movement that followed, have sought to collectively transform the terms on which the university exists, the purpose and nature of the knowledge it conveys and produces, and the pedagogical operations through which students are taught. The movement especially focuses on transforming and dissolving the colonial legacy that it suggests underlies the logic of Western university institutions. The movement is based on the observation that the university is still reproducing and justifying colonial hierarchies through disciplinary divisions, theoretical models, and Eurocentric narratives and materials. Various intellectual materials distributed by Western universities are still predominantly white and Eurocentric, and people of color, when they do appear, are often portrayed tokenistically, spoken on behalf of, or presented as objects of study.<sup>8</sup>

Decolonizing the university is rooted in the more general concept of *decolonization*, which refers to a wider process of challenging the continuing existence of Western economic, epistemic, and cultural privilege over the Global South and indigenous peoples and racialized minorities.<sup>9</sup> Decolonization aims to heal the “colonial wound” of dismissing and silencing non-Western voices and classifying entire regions and people around the world as mentally, culturally, and economically underdeveloped.<sup>10</sup> While decolonization involves various different definitions, aims, and strategies, the concept has two key referents: First, it takes the phenomenon of colonialism as its central object of study and sees it as crucial in shaping the relations of power operative in the contemporary world. Second, it aims to offer alternative approaches to thinking about the world and ways of organizing political practices differently.<sup>11</sup> In the context of decolonizing the university, these key referents are applied to the examination of the logic of university institutions, scientific inquiry, and pedagogical practices.

While decolonization has had a rather broad focus in universities — that is, its aim has been to illuminate the broader colonial hierarchies in institutions of higher education rather than merely to advance the rights of a particular minority — in the context of general basic education, the movement has often focused on the inclusion of indigenous knowledges in the curriculum. As a result, it has been particularly strong in societies with significant indigenous populations, such as Canada and Australia. The incorporation of indigenous knowledges as part of the curriculum and pedagogical practices is seen as crucially important in terms of improving the social status of indigenous students. The science education

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8. Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu, *Decolonising the University*, 5–6.

9. Arlene Harvey and Gabrielle Russell-Mundine, “Decolonising the Curriculum: Using Graduate Qualities to Embed Indigenous Knowledges at the Academic Cultural Interface,” *Teaching in Higher Education* 24, no. 6 (2019): 791.

10. Walter Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought, and Decolonial Freedom,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 26, no. 7–8 (2009): 161.

11. Bhambra, Gebrial and Nişancıoğlu, *Decolonising the University*, 2.

curriculum in particular, which is primarily based on Western understandings of science and knowledge, is perceived to create confusion and discomfort among indigenous students whose worldview and ways of knowing are based on holistic, relational, and spiritual practices for understanding the world.<sup>12</sup>

It is usually emphasized that the focus of decolonizing the university is *epistemic* rather than purely ideological or political. This means that the purpose of the movement is not simply to make university institutions more egalitarian by increasing their demographic diversity. The aim is, rather, to challenge and transform the epistemological foundations involved in the production and transmission of knowledge. In particular, the movement focuses on questioning a Eurocentric monocultural approach to knowledge, research, teaching, and learning, and emphasizes the plurality of ways of knowing and engaging with reality and history.<sup>13</sup> This emphasis on epistemological transformation echoes the equivalent objectives of postcolonial research: as Vanessa Andreotti points out, Western science has a long tradition of portraying itself as a privileged, politically neutral, and universalized epistemic site, of which non-Western systems of knowledge are seen as primitive, inaccurate, and “culturally tainted” derivatives.<sup>14</sup> Non-Western knowledges are rarely assigned intrinsic value or respected in their own right; their value is determined through their relation to Western knowledge.<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, many representatives of postcolonial research and decolonization have focused on contesting the idea of Western modern science as the paradigmatic example of science, one that is capable of conveying knowledge superior to other forms of knowing. These scholars have emphasized the plurality of knowledges, all of which, including Western modern science, exist in a particular cultural and historical context. Challenging the priority of Western modern science, and any universalist, privileged epistemological stance for that matter, is an essential part of decolonization.<sup>16</sup> As Boaventura de Sousa Santos summarizes,

if social practices and collective actors resort to different kinds of knowledge, an adequate evaluation of their value for social emancipation must be premised upon a new epistemology, which, contrary to hegemonic epistemologies in the West, does not grant a priori supremacy to scientific knowledge (heavily produced in the North). It must allow for a more just relationship among different kinds of knowledge. In other words, there is no global social justice without global cognitive justice. Therefore, in order to capture the immense variety of

12. Mijung Kim, “Indigenous Knowledge in Canadian Science Curricula: Cases from Western Canada,” *Cultural Studies of Science Education* 12, no. 3 (2017): 606.

13. Rosalba Icaza and Rolando Vázquez, “Diversity or Decolonisation? Researching Diversity at the University of Amsterdam,” in *Decolonising the University*, eds. Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu, 119.

14. Vanessa Andreotti, “(Towards) Decoloniality and Diversity in Global Citizenship Education,” *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 9, no. 3–4 (2011): 385.

15. Harvey and Russell-Mundine, “Decolonising the Curriculum,” 792.

16. Icaza and Vázquez, “Diversity or Decolonisation?,” 119; and Elizabeth McKinley, “Locating the Global: Culture, Language, and Science Education for Indigenous Students,” *International Journal of Science Education* 27, no. 2 (2005): 229.

critical discourses and practices and to valorize and maximize their transformative potential, an epistemological reconstruction is needed.<sup>17</sup>

### THE PROBLEM OF EPISTEMOLOGICAL DIVERSITY AND THE FUSION OF NORMATIVE AND EPISTEMIC CLAIMS

While I find the political and moral claims of decolonization broadly defensible, in this section I will draw attention to two issues that arise with its emphasis on epistemology. The first issue is the idea of diversification of forms of knowledge indicated in the previous section. This issue has been rather extensively discussed in philosophy of education under the concept of *epistemological diversity*.<sup>18</sup> As Harvey Siegel argues, epistemological diversity, when it is used to indicate the diversity of *standards* of knowledge rather than unproblematic and uncontroversial forms of diversity — such as the diversity of *beliefs* and *belief systems*, diverse *research methods* and *research questions*, or the diversity of *researchers* and their *cultural backgrounds* — might yield a problematic form of relativism. This is why Siegel advises against diversifying the standards of knowledge while applauding diversity in the other forms mentioned above.<sup>19</sup>

Siegel's view coincides with those presented in the context of philosophy of science more generally: philosophers of science typically suggest that while there are epistemically productive forms of diversity, the ability of scientific communities to accommodate diversity is not unlimited.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, productive forms of diversity do not usually concern standards of knowledge but the *social* diversity of the research community (e.g., demographic diversity) or the *cognitive* diversity of researchers. Cognitive diversity, in particular, which is associated with researchers' different theoretical or methodological perspectives on the subject matter, their access to different bodies of knowledge, or their specific standpoints as epistemic agents, can be epistemically productive in a variety of ways. One of the central benefits of cognitive diversity is the ability to generate critical exchanges within the community and to identify and correct false beliefs or biased accounts of the subject matter of inquiry.<sup>21</sup> The social diversity generated by the participation of marginalized groups (as in the case of decolonization) might help to illuminate

17. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 42.

18. On the concept of epistemological diversity in educational research, see Claudia Ruitenberg and D. C. Phillips, eds., *Education, Culture and Epistemological Diversity: Mapping a Contested Terrain* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 2012).

19. Harvey Siegel, "Epistemological Diversity and Education Research: Much Ado about Nothing Much?," *Educational Researcher* 35, no. 2 (2006): 6–7.

20. See, for example, Philip Kitcher, *The Advancement of Science: Science without Legend, Objectivity without Illusions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); and Miriam Solomon, *Social Empiricism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

21. Kristina Rolin, "The Epistemic Significance of Diversity," in *The Routledge Handbook of Social Epistemology*, ed. Miranda Fricker, Peter J. Graham, David Henderson, and Nikolaj J.L.L. Pedersen (New York: Routledge, 2019), 1.



situations in which scientific research is biased or distorted due to ideological or political factors.<sup>22</sup> This appreciation and recognition of the epistemic value of diversity, however, does not require rejecting shared standards of knowledge. Rather, as Helen Longino argues, diversity is typically productive of knowledge only insofar as it occurs in the presence of shared epistemic standards.<sup>23</sup> I will return to this issue in the following sections of the paper.

From a Habermasian perspective, there is another reason why epistemological diversity might not be beneficial even from the perspective of non-Western knowledge systems: in addition to the ability to discern between legitimate and illegitimate epistemological positions, shared epistemic standards are required for facilitating research communities that are open to truth claims presented by agents beyond their own, immediate epistemic community. As I will demonstrate in the next section, according to Habermas a shared standard of validity, such as the concept of truth, plays a central role in motivating researchers to consider viewpoints that challenge and diverge from broadly accepted beliefs within a given community.<sup>24</sup> Differently put, without some set of shared standards there is no reason to consider those other viewpoints seriously.

The second issue that arises with decolonization is the fusion between normative (moral or political) and epistemic claims presented by the movement. By this I mean the aforementioned view of the representatives of decolonization that the normative claims of social and global justice are inseparable from the epistemic aims of the movement and thus authorize epistemic transformation. While I agree with the view held by many (if not most) philosophers of science that nonepistemic value judgments — such as moral, political or ideological values — are at least to some extent unavoidable in scientific research and can in many cases be even necessary and valuable in different stages of knowledge production,<sup>25</sup> there nevertheless are reasons to hold epistemic and normative claims as analytically distinguishable from each other. I base this argument on Habermas's insight, introduced in the next section, according to which normative and objective validity claims refer to different domains and therefore require distinct criteria of validity. As I will demonstrate later, what follows from this difference is that claims that might be justifiable from a normative perspective may not be equally defensible as epistemic claims. Before engaging with this issue in more depth, an introduction into Habermas's distinction between objective and normative validity is required.

22. See, for example, Emily Robertson, "The Epistemic Value of Diversity," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 47, no. 2 (2013): 299–310.

23. Helen Longino, *The Fate of Knowledge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 148.

24. Jürgen Habermas, "Richard Rorty's Pragmatic Turn," in *On the Pragmatics of Communication*, trans. and ed. Maeve Cooke (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 369–370.

25. See, for example, Sharon Crasnow, "Feminist Philosophy of Science: Values and Objectivity," *Philosophy Compass* 8, no. 4 (2013): 413–423; and Heather Douglas, *Science, Policy, and the Value-Free Ideal* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009).

## OBJECTIVE AND NORMATIVE VALIDITY IN HABERMAS'S PHILOSOPHY

Although Habermas has not discussed scientific research or communities to any relevant extent after developing his discourse theory, as a model of justificational rational discourse can be seen as offering a normative framework for scientific research.<sup>26</sup> Habermas's idea of rational discourse as a way of justifying disputed claims of validity originates in his theory of communicative action and the idea of the validity basis of speech. Habermas distinguishes between the unreflective level of normal communication, which operates on a broad background consensus of shared beliefs and norms that renders actions intelligible, and argumentation as a reflective mode of communication through which disputed validity claims can be corroborated in a rational manner.<sup>27</sup> Habermas suggests that for argumentation to function as a mean of rationally resolving conflicts concerning validity, it must occur under sufficiently idealized preconditions to ensure the impartiality of the process of justification. These preconditions, which Habermas refers to as the "idealizing presuppositions of argumentation"<sup>28</sup> — the inclusion of all those affected, equal distribution of the right to communicate, absence of coercion in adopting positions and posing arguments, the sincerity of expressions, and the binding force of the best argument — give rational discourse context-transcending force. As rules of communication, these presuppositions guide the participants to strive for the fulfillment of ideal justificatory conditions and thus enable the validation of contested claims through the pursuit of a rationally motivated consensus.<sup>29</sup>

In a manner analogous to argumentation, scientific research is a form of higher-order activity in which claims of validity that have become questionable on the practical level can be addressed in a hypothetical fashion through well-designed and carefully performed experiments, and further through critical exchange and argumentation among scientific communities and researchers. Scientific knowledge, and the canons of knowledge that are used in the construction of curricula in higher education, can therefore be understood as the end results of processes of justification and critical exchange parallel to those illustrated by the notion of rational discourse.<sup>30</sup> Accordingly, through its normative preconditions, the notion of rational discourse provides a forceful normative framework for understanding how scientific inquiry should work in order to be as impartial and free from bias as possible.

To continue the analogy between scientific research and discursive justification, sciences can thus be seen as operating with different types of validity claims.

26. For a reading of Habermas in the context of philosophy of science and scientific research, see William Rehg, *Cogent Science in Context: The Science Wars, Argumentation Theory, and Habermas* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009).

27. Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1: *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston, MA: Beacon Press), 17–19.

28. Habermas, *Truth and Justification*, 37.

29. *Ibid.*, 260.

30. Rehg, *Cogent Science in Context*, 136.



Habermas distinguishes between three different spheres of validity — objective, intersubjective, and subjective — of which I will here focus on the first two.<sup>31</sup> Claims of objective validity can be understood as *truth claims* about the objective world which, for Habermas, is the world that “encompasses everything that subjects capable of speech and action do not “make themselves” irrespective of their interventions and inventions.”<sup>32</sup> The objective world is thus the physical world of objects and the referent of empirical claims. In contrast to the objective world, the social world, which is the referent of normative claims of validity, is intersubjectively and linguistically constituted and consists of rule-governed behaviors, such as practical, ethical, legal, and moral norms, and the social structures and processes governed by these norms. The main difference between these worlds is that the latter is “up to us” humans in a very different sense from the first. Granted, the social world also appears as “objective” to individual agents because social structures are not directly transformable by any single individual. However, whereas the intersubjective world depends on and ultimately consists of normative agreements, the objective world has its own independent existence.<sup>33</sup>

Based on the differences between objective and normative validity, Habermas develops distinct criteria of validity for each sphere: truth and normative rightness.<sup>34</sup> Habermas characterizes truth as a justification-transcendent concept, which means that truth is independent of, and not exhausted by, linguistic processes of justification.<sup>35</sup> Rightness, in turn, is a justification-immanent concept in the sense that no moral or normative reality exists beyond the normative consensus reached under sufficiently idealized conditions of justification.<sup>36</sup> I will first discuss the notion of truth in more detail and then return to the concept of moral rightness.

In his earlier discourse theory of truth, which Habermas held until the mid-1990s, he maintained that truth is inseparable from processes of justification and should therefore be defined as rational acceptability under ideal conditions

31. In *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas offers two ways for distinguishing between objective and normative validity: first, by examining the reasons that are used to defend expressions that contain these claims; and second, by examining the worlds to which actors relate when they use these expressions, such as the objective world of existing states of affairs or the social world of normatively regulated interactions. See Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, 43–101.

32. Habermas, *Truth and Justification*, 254.

33. *Ibid.*, 256. As noted, Habermas also introduces a third domain of validity, *the subjective world*, which consists of the total of personal experiences to which a person has privileged access, and which is therefore not typically the object domain of scientific research. *Sincerity* is the criterion used to assess the validity of utterances with respect to this domain. See Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, 25–26.

34. See Habermas, *Truth and Justification*, chapter 6, “Rightness versus Truth: On the Sense of Normative Validity in Moral Judgments and Norms,” 237–275.

35. Habermas, *Truth and Justification*, 230.

36. *Ibid.*, 248.

of rational discourse.<sup>37</sup> This definition was based on the idea, broadly accepted after the linguistic turn, that it is impossible to access brute facts or “naked” reality unmediated by linguistic frameworks.<sup>38</sup> However, Habermas was later troubled by the ramifications of this formulation for some of the deep-seated realist intuitions involved in scientific research and everyday practices, such as the intuition that even most well-justified beliefs may turn out false in light of new evidence or that the most advanced scientific theories gradually approach truth. Both of these intuitions require recognition of truth as a standard of validity that is not exhausted by processes of justification.<sup>39</sup> This led Habermas to argue that although the truth of a claim can only be corroborated through reason-giving under approximately ideal conditions of argumentation, it does not mean that truth should be defined as justifiability under ideal conditions.<sup>40</sup> As Habermas points out, it is counterintuitive to say that a proposition is true because it has been agreed upon by agents in rational discourse. Instead, agents can agree upon a particular proposition *because* it is true.<sup>41</sup> Habermas thus argues that truth should be defined as “a property that a proposition ‘cannot lose’.”<sup>42</sup>

In order to explain how such a justification-transcendent truth criterion can nevertheless maintain its connection to and relevance for practices of justification, Habermas develops what he refers to as a “pragmatic conception of truth.”<sup>43</sup> In pragmatism, linguistic and cultural practices are understood to be ways of coping with external reality that are entwined with instrumental actions and interventions in the objective world. Accordingly, the inability to step out of language and describe the relation between language and reality does not indicate the arbitrariness of this relation. Rather, as Habermas points out, “as interacting and intervening subjects, we are always already in contact with things about which we can make statements.”<sup>44</sup> Based on this idea, Habermas also seeks to demonstrate the pragmatic impossibility of the idea that actors with different referential systems are operating with different, incommensurable understandings of the world. Habermas stresses that successful communication presupposes that when actors engage with each other and the world in their everyday activities, they must assume to be operating with an objective world that is one and the same for everyone and with beliefs that are true in an absolute rather than conditional

37. *Ibid.*, 36–37. See also Steven Levine, “Truth and Moral Validity: On Habermas’ Domesticated Pragmatism,” *Constellations* 18, no. 2 (2011): 244.

38. Habermas, “Richard Rorty’s Pragmatic Turn,” 357.

39. Habermas, *Truth and Justification*, 257.

40. Habermas, “Richard Rorty’s Pragmatic Turn,” 367–368; and Habermas, *Truth and Justification*, 38.

41. Habermas, *Truth and Justification*, 101.

42. *Ibid.*, 91.

43. Habermas, “Richard Rorty’s Pragmatic Turn,” 369.

44. *Ibid.*, 359.

sense.<sup>45</sup> Simply put, regardless of the referential system a person relies on, no one goes about their everyday life believing that their beliefs are valid only in a particular context or in a conditional sense. Instead, we all walk on bridges and enter through doors without questioning the validity of the beliefs on which we act. In this pragmatic sense, we all operate with the same “realist” assumptions and within the same physical world. Moreover, Habermas also argues that this realism is not unwarranted: namely, the beliefs that we hold, and the practices that we rely on, are continuously being corroborated by their successfulness and their continuing “functioning” or “working.”<sup>46</sup> He further argues that without an objective world that in some sense “meets” these linguistic practices halfway, those practices would simply fall apart.<sup>47</sup>

Habermas argues that this mundane realism also operates as a tacit assumption in such processes of justification that scientific research relies upon. Hence, while researchers must hold a hypothetical orientation to the body of knowledge they work with — that is, they must treat the prevailing scientific knowledge as fallible and revisable — scientists also operate with a tacit understanding of an objective world that is “really there” and knowable at least in the pragmatic sense described above.<sup>48</sup> Importantly, Habermas further argues that the concept of truth that arises with these assumptions is crucial for maintaining the fallibilism and epistemic nondogmatism that characterizes scientific research. Habermas argues that if participants in discourse assume that there is nothing “beyond” linguistic processes of justification, there is no rational motivation to expand the community of justification beyond one’s immediate epistemic community. This is because the rejection of truth entails the rejection of an objective world that could function as the foundation of agreement between different referential systems. Without a common referent, different knowledge systems refer to and constitute different “worlds.” In such incommensurability of “worlds,” the rational motivation to expand the community of justification beyond the members of one’s own group, whether that group be a scientific community or a cultural group, is lost.<sup>49</sup> In Habermas’s view, the concept of truth thus has an important role to play not only as an epistemic criterion, but as a driving force for researchers to increase the epistemic diversity of their research communities — precisely in order to exhaust all possible objections to the claims or hypotheses being corroborated.

However, as for all epistemic standards, the Habermasian notion of truth sets limits on the type of diversity it is epistemically beneficial to engage with. In *Truth and Justification*, Habermas develops the functional explanation of truth

45. Habermas, *Truth and Justification*, 89, 254.

46. *Ibid.*, 255. See also Steven Hendley, “Habermas between Metaphysical and Natural Realism,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 14, no. 4 (2006): 524.

47. Habermas, “Richard Rorty’s Pragmatic Turn,” 359.

48. Habermas, *Truth and Justification*, 253–254.

49. Habermas, “Richard Rorty’s Pragmatic Turn,” 375.

just provided into an applicable truth criterion: he argues that participants in discourse must be able to ground their reasons for believing *p* in a *learning process* that has taken place through their practical engagements with the objective world. In other words, the relevance of a provided justification to truth depends on the reasons that a person has for her beliefs, and these reasons must be proven to be reasons that have involved a process of learning “in the world itself.”<sup>50</sup> As Steven Hendley points out in his elaborate discussion of Habermas’s truth concept, it is the concept of *learning* that makes the connection between justification and truth comprehensible to the participants in discourse:

If I can understand my reasoning as an instance of learning “in the world itself,” I can see how my justification is relevant to establishing the truth. I can believe myself rationally entitled to resume taking the footbridge’s safety for granted because I see how the reasons I adduced for its safety involved learning about the footbridge itself. After all, I did not just meditate prayerfully on the safety of the bridge or consult holy scripture. I shook it as hard as I could. In this way I learned about the kind of forces the footbridge would bear.<sup>51</sup>

In the natural sciences, these “learning processes” typically take the form of experimentation — a systematic process of trial and error that results in the acquisition of knowledge that gradually approaches truth. As William Rehg points out, scientific argumentation in the natural sciences is deeply intertwined with experimental engagements with reality and, therefore, it can be argued that “*experiments* test problematic truth claims and thereby ascertain truth — albeit only experiments that have been worked up into cogent empirical arguments.”<sup>52</sup> Hence, when Habermas points out that argumentation “remains the only available medium of ascertaining truth since truth claims that have been problematized cannot be tested in any other way,”<sup>53</sup> this should be taken to mean that while argumentation is founded on reasons that are further based on experiments, the results of experimentation must always be formulated into linguistic arguments in order for them to be employable in justification. In this process, the immediate connection that exists between experiments and reality is replaced with a linguistically mediated connection.<sup>54</sup>

As I will argue in the next section, the pragmatic criterion of truth outlined above allows forming a more comprehensive understanding of the justification of the epistemic claims of decolonization. My argument is that Habermas’s truth criterion is especially beneficial for understanding what makes a particular belief or knowledge system epistemically productive and thus authorizes these systems to be included in scientific processes of justification. Hence, while the pragmatic criterion, like any epistemically relevant standard of knowledge, excludes

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50. Habermas, *Truth and Justification*, 41.

51. Hendley, “Habermas between Metaphysical and Natural Realism,” 524.

52. Rehg, *Cogent Science in Context*, 122 (emphasis in original).

53. Habermas, *Truth and Justification*, 38.

54. Rehg, *Cogent Science in Context*, 121–122.

some beliefs or knowledge systems from scientific processes, it also provides a strong epistemic justification for the inclusion of those knowledge systems that are, in fact, epistemically productive, even if they do not represent the predominant scientific tradition. By doing so, the Habermasian approach provides a stronger justification for the inclusion of nondominant, albeit epistemically relevant, perspectives than what would exist in the absence of a shared standard of knowledge.

In addition, the normative claims of decolonization find support in Habermas's discourse morality. In order to ground this argument, I will now move on to Habermas's understanding of normative validity and his notion of moral rightness. As Habermas himself points out, the relationship between truth and normative rightness is *analogous* rather than identical.<sup>55</sup> Moral knowledge is different from empirical knowledge because it indicates how people ought to act, and not how things are in the objective world. As Habermas points out, "facts owe their facticity to their being rooted in a world of objects ... that exist independently of our descriptions of them."<sup>56</sup> In contrast, the social reality to which claims of normative rightness refer is not objectively given but constituted by a linguistically attained consensus with others. In social reality, there is thus nothing external to the practice of justification itself that would account for the rightness of a norm.<sup>57</sup> This is why Habermas concludes that, unlike truth, moral rightness *should* be understood as a "justification-immanent"<sup>58</sup> concept and *defined as* justifiability under ideal conditions of rational discourse. This justification-immanence is what Walter Okshevsky refers to as the "strong dialogicality" of Habermas's account of morality: consensus reached under ideal conditions does not simply *contribute* to the rightness of the norm but *defines* it.<sup>59</sup>

What nevertheless places moral rightness on par with truth is the moment of context-transcendence that rightness as a universal criterion of normative validity gives rise to. By universality, I here refer to the idea that the obligatoriness of moral norms does not only concern members of a given cultural group, or the citizens of a given society, but ideally all human beings, including past and future generations. The criterion of moral rightness is thus a context-transcending ideal that calls for the realization of an all-inclusive and fully egalitarian global order — "a world of well-ordered social relationships"<sup>60</sup> — in which everyone affected is granted equal

55. Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 68; and Jürgen Habermas, *Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 29.

56. Habermas, *Truth and Justification*, 257.

57. *Ibid.*, 42.

58. *Ibid.*, 248.

59. Walter Okshevsky, "Discourse, Justification, and Education: Jürgen Habermas on Moral Epistemology and Dialogical Conditions of Moral Justification and Rightness," *Educational Theory* 66, no. 6 (2016): 691.

60. Habermas, *Truth and Justification*, 260.

representation in moral discourse. In this sense, the concept of moral rightness is parallel to the notion of global justice.<sup>61</sup>

Because of the ideal or counterfactual nature of the preconditions of rational discourse, just as with truth claims, norms that are agreed upon in a given context should be treated as open to revision. This is because it is always possible that participants will learn in retrospect that the ideal preconditions of justification were not satisfied to the extent that they believed at the time; for instance, some perspectives that should have been included had been excluded, certain topics had been suppressed, or relevant contributions had been disregarded.<sup>62</sup> Moral rightness as a criterion of moral validity should thus be understood as having an “aspirational” character that guides members of communities of justification to pursue conditions in which that criterion could, in principle, be met.

Importantly, because of the difference between truth as a justification-transcendent concept and moral rightness as a justification-immanent concept, the obligation to involve all those affected is even stronger in the case of normative than in objective validity. Because social reality is intersubjectively constituted, no claim of normative validity can be excluded from the process of justification without jeopardizing the validity of the outcome. The situation is slightly different in the case of objective claims, where the “resistance” encountered by truth claims is by an objective world rather than the disagreement of other individuals. Whereas moral reality is constituted through common processes of reasoning and opinion-formation in which the exclusion of any party would potentially change the outcome, the objective world simply “is,” irrespective of the agreement reached in justificatory processes. What follows from this is that not all epistemic positions are equal justificatory authorities in the same sense as in the case of moral norms. Rather, some depict reality more adequately than others. In the next section, I will elaborate on this idea in relation to the normative and epistemic claims of decolonizing the university.

#### A HABERMASIAN PERSPECTIVE ON DECOLONIZING THE UNIVERSITY

In this section, I will use Habermas’s distinction between objective and normative validity to examine the justification of the normative and epistemic claims involved in decolonizing the university. I will start by examining the justification of the normative claims of the movement, especially those that concern the transformation of the institutional order of universities toward a more just, inclusive, and egalitarian form. As Julian Culp argues in his discourse-theoretical reading of the nature of just institutions, when applied to an institutional context such as the university, discourse morality entails that the institutional rules on which the university operates must be justifiable to its members in a way that they can come

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61. See, for example, Julian Culp, *Democratic Education in a Globalized World: A Normative Theory* (London: Routledge, 2019).

62. Habermas, *Truth and Justification*, 259.



to see themselves as authors of their institutions. Accordingly, the institutional rules, practices, and policies of universities should result from reasoning processes in which no one has enjoyed greater justificatory authority than others or been arbitrarily excluded. As Culp points out, no justification counts as valid in a moral sense simply because some party with an alleged natural right to rule or a privileged social position has articulated it.<sup>63</sup>

From the viewpoint of the nature of just institutions, a “Western” order in which the institutional rules, pedagogical practices, and divisions between disciplines are remnants of a colonial legacy, and in which different structures and practices systematically exclude or marginalize non-Western perspectives, is clearly unjust. Social institutions such as the university should seek to ensure that all their members have appropriate social and political roles through which they can take part as equals in exchanging reasons concerning the norms that govern their common institutions.<sup>64</sup> In the case of the university, this means not only diversifying the university community, but also guaranteeing that previously excluded or marginalized groups are equally represented in the bodies of institutional power within the university.

Moreover, a distinctly “Western” university is untenable also from the perspective that the communities that university institutions entail are no longer merely local ones. Both the research activities and the educational programs that universities provide are increasingly international and global. Moreover, the intellectual products of the sciences are indisputably global: everyone should be able to access, use, and benefit from the research findings of different disciplines regardless of their membership in particular communities. Considering this global scope, universities as institutions should ideally be governed by such rules of action that a global or international community could abide by. This extension of the scope of justice is particularly important for justifying decolonization, which is rooted in the idea that the self-proclaimed superiority and privilege of Western values, ways of thinking, and canons of knowledge are indefensible. As Seyla Benhabib argues, in a world of global interconnectedness there exists a strong pragmatic imperative to expand the community of justification from local to global. However, as she aptly points out in her defense of discourse morality, “a pluralistically enlightened ethical universalism” is required for justifying any such project with a global scope.<sup>65</sup>

Finally, the normative claims of decolonialization can also be justified from the perspective of the *moral norm of equality of cultures* and the institutional requirements that follow from it. The norm of equality of cultures that I refer to in this context derives from Kenneth Avio’s discourse-theoretical interpretation of aboriginal rights and is based on his reconstruction of the historical relations

63. Culp, *Democratic Education in a Globalized World*, 37.

64. *Ibid.*, 38.

65. Seyla Benhabib, “Is Universalism Ethnocentric?,” in *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 35–36.

between sovereign indigenous peoples and the state. It is thus a reconstruction of what the parties involved could potentially have agreed to if the discourse ethical conditions of equality and mutual respect had been realized.<sup>66</sup> Christopher Martin has elaborated on this norm to argue for transitional aboriginal rights, which can be understood as moral rights claimable by individual inheritors of cultural traditions that seek to compensate for the historical wrongs directed at those traditions.<sup>67</sup> While the conception of “culture” that decolonization operates on is plural rather than singular, Martin’s discussion nevertheless provides a useful analogy to my argumentation: namely, that in the case of decolonization, the normative claims being placed concern rectifying historical wrongs — violations to the norm of equality of cultures — experienced by colonized peoples. Hence, in a way analogous to states’ moral obligation to repair a normatively distorted process of inequalitarian exclusion of aboriginal rights and to establish the institutionalization of these rights, Western institutions, such as Western universities, could also be held morally accountable for the historical harms inflicted on the colonized. Part of rectifying such harms should involve ensuring that marginalized groups acquire an equal footing within the university institution, as described above. However, as Martin’s discussion indicates, it might also involve making non-Western cultures live, material options for study by Western and non-Western members of the university community through the curriculum and the university culture more broadly speaking. As I indicate later, though, the representation of non-Western cultures in the curriculum does not necessarily mean replacing Western knowledge systems with non-Western ones; rather, such representation can be realized in a variety of ways.

Based on these remarks, it can thus be argued that Habermasian discourse morality provides strong support for the normative claim of decolonization to restructure the institutional rules and pedagogical practices of the university so that these rules and practices adequately represent the perspectives of previously marginalized groups. Even so, as I pointed out earlier, the claims presented by decolonization are not exclusively normative; its moral and political claims are intertwined with epistemic ones concerning the epistemic value and relevance of non-Western knowledge systems. Bearing in mind the distinction between truth and rightness introduced in the previous section, some additional considerations are required when examining the justification of decolonization from an epistemic perspective. First, it must be noted that claims can be *epistemic* without being objective claims of validity in a Habermasian sense: objective claims of validity refer exclusively to the physical or the natural world, thus leaving out epistemic claims that refer to the world of interpersonal relationships. However, I will start by addressing sciences that deal exclusively with objective claims.

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66. See Kenneth L. Avio, “Aboriginal Property Rights in Canada,” *Canadian Public Policy* 20, no. 4 (1994): 415–442; and Kenneth L. Avio, “A Discourse-Theoretic Approach to Aboriginal Rights,” *Canadian Journal of Economics* 29, no. 1 (1996): 619–621.

67. Christopher Martin, “Transitional Justice and the Task of Inclusion: A Habermasian Perspective on the Justification of Aboriginal Educational Rights,” *Educational Theory* 64, no. 1 (2014): 49.

It holds for both normative and objective validity that no validity claim can be justifiably excluded *prior to* the process of justification. Nevertheless, unlike the case of moral norms, where all affected parties should ideally agree on the norms that govern their life together, in the case of truth claims agreement is an insufficient criterion of validity. The independent, objective world, rather than the agreement concerning that world, should be accountable for discerning between legitimate and illegitimate truth claims. Accordingly, as noted in the previous section, a different standard of validity — the pragmatic criterion of truth — is required. The essential content of this criterion is that, for a truth claim to be epistemically relevant, the reasons developed in support of that claim must be rooted in a learning process within the objective world.<sup>68</sup> As these learning processes provide the required connection between “the world” and linguistic processes of justification, from a Habermasian perspective, this criterion can be used as a ground for rejecting truth claims that cannot be supported with reasons that are rooted in adequate learning processes.

While the experimental methods developed in the context of Western sciences perhaps provide a paradigmatic example of the kind of learning processes just referred to, this does not necessarily authorize the straightforward conclusion that Western sciences should be granted priority over other forms of knowledge. Nor should it be taken to signify that the epistemic claims of decolonization are unjustified. First, as I have argued above, it is possible to perceive the requirement to incorporate non-Western knowledges in scientific research as a purely *normative* requirement and to justify this inclusion on moral rather than epistemic grounds. Then the decision to include alternative knowledge systems is simply a matter of the relative weight given to truth-seeking practices as compared to justice-seeking ones. I will return to this idea later in this section.

Second, as I indicated earlier in this paper, there is evidence of the *epistemic* productiveness of including underrepresented or marginalized perspectives in scientific inquiry, especially when the processes of knowledge production are systematically distorted by collective bias. Even if the criticism presented by these groups does not give scientists reason to reject the predominant view, it may force them to provide better arguments for their views or to communicate them more clearly and effectively. In this way, criticism provided by marginalized groups can help research communities to avoid epistemic dogmatism.<sup>69</sup> This could be interpreted as an epistemic requirement to include the perspectives of underrepresented groups in the processes of justification and to examine the justifiability of *their* claims as thoroughly as the claims expressed by predominant positions.

However, recognizing the epistemic value of alternative perspectives does not diminish the need for a shared criterion of validity such as that exemplified by Habermas’s pragmatic truth concept. That is to say, the ability of any epistemic position to provide criticism that is constructive of knowledge requires the

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68. Habermas, *Truth and Justification*, 41.

69. Rolin, “The Epistemic Significance of Diversity,” 161.

existence and acknowledgment of some shared epistemic standard. For instance, as Siegel points out, a feminist critique of the biased nature of the male-dominated perspective on society requires a fair critical evaluation of relevant evidence and so depends on a conception of objectivity or impartiality of some kind; without some such conception, there would be no reason to think that the alternative epistemic perspective is able to yield less distorted knowledge.<sup>70</sup> Similarly, in order to challenge the predominant view of Western modern science in a relevant way, alternative knowledge systems would have to be able to demonstrate, through a description of a learning process (and thus through recourse to the pragmatic truth criterion), that the predominant view leaves out some relevant aspects of reality that they can better account for.

In light of the justification of decolonization, the strength of Habermas's pragmatic truth criterion is that it is rather permissible. It does not demand, for instance, that interventions or engagements with the objective world — the learning processes — must be based on such systematic experimental methods as those developed in modern natural sciences. An oral tradition, folk memory, alternative medical practice, or practical knowledge of some other kind might thus be able to meet this criterion, insofar as it involves knowledge of how, and through what type of learning process, the beliefs in question have been formed. Moreover, as Sven Ove Hansson points out, discussions about indigenous and other alternative knowledges systematically neglect the fact that quite often there are significant continuities, such as similar fact-finding and experimental practices, between indigenous knowledges and Western scientific research. These practices would evidently count as learning processes in a Habermasian sense.<sup>71</sup> These continuities have been recognized and made use of in several collaborative research projects with indigenous peoples: for instance, research on the effects of climate change on human populations has involved collaboration with peoples living in areas that are most vulnerable to the effects of climate change, such as Inuit people in Greenland or pastoral peoples across sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>72</sup> These peoples have acquired an understanding, through their everyday practices, about survival in the areas affected by climate change and can thus increase knowledge about both the consequences of climate change to human populations and survival mechanisms and practices required by such circumstances. These examples also coincide with those discussed by Raymond Morrow in his Habermasian analysis of indigenous knowledges: Morrow highlights research and educational practices that avoid polarizing "Western" and "indigenous" knowledges.<sup>73</sup>

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70. Siegel, "Epistemological Diversity and Education Research," 8.

71. Sven Ove Hansson, "How to Reconcile the Multiculturalist and Universalist Approaches to Science Education," *Cultural Studies of Science Education* 13, no. 2 (2018): 518.

72. See, for example, Silja Klepp and Libertad Chavez-Rodriguez, eds., *A Critical Approach to Climate Change Adaptation: Discourses, Policies, and Practices* (Boca Raton, FL: Routledge, 2018).

73. Raymond Morrow, "Habermas, Eurocentrism, and Education: The Indigenous Knowledge Debate," in *Habermas, Critical Theory and Education*, ed. Mark Murphy and Ted Fleming (London: Routledge, 2010), 72–73.

Moreover, as I noted above, not all epistemic claims are objective claims of validity in a Habermasian sense. The disciplines that address objective validity claims are limited to the “hard sciences” such as physics, chemistry, biology, geology, and astronomy. Even some of these sciences are “softer” than others: for instance, many issues related to human biology, such as gender or sexual identity and orientation, are topics of continued ideological and political debate, and there is no widespread agreement on the nature of “objective facts” in these cases. Things become increasingly complicated when addressing disciplines that primarily concern the social world, such as educational, social, and political sciences; history; literature; law; and economics. In some of these disciplines or in some of their subareas, something akin to Habermas’s pragmatic truth criterion may be applicable, but in many cases the epistemic claims made in these disciplines may be difficult to distinguish from nonepistemic values, including political, cultural, and ideological values. Take history, for example: it is possible to think that there is an “objective history” in an analogous sense to the idea that there is an objective world concerning which we can make truth claims. This view, however, overlooks the partiality often involved in history writing. For instance, it is widely recognized that the histories of oppression experienced by indigenous and non-Western peoples have been dismissed because colonizers have produced most of the written accounts of history.<sup>74</sup> Hence, while history as a scientific discipline addresses events that actually occurred, it is also a powerful means of shaping the understanding of who we are as members of a given society or community and how we relate to other societies and peoples.

However, the influence of nonepistemic values in these disciplines does not mean that there should not be *any* criteria; rather, as the discussion in the previous section indicates, unlike the concept of truth, these criteria should be viewed as justification-immanent. For Habermas, moral rightness functions as such a justification-immanent criterion of validity in the normative domain. In the context of the sciences, such a criterion could be translated into a criterion of *impartiality* that can be abstracted from the preconditions of rational discourse as a model of justification.<sup>75</sup> Significantly, by impartiality I do not refer to the absence of any perspective or standpoint, an interpretation of the term that is often seen as very problematic from minority viewpoints.<sup>76</sup> Rather, by “impartiality” I mean the epistemic qualities that arise within the preconditions of rational discourse, such as equal opportunities to take part in scientific debate, openness to criticism from other epistemic perspectives, readiness to give reasons to the claims presented, and

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74. See, for example, Jenni Conrad, “The Big History Project and Colonizing Knowledges in World History Curriculum,” *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 51, no. 1 (2019): 3–4.

75. See, for example, Jürgen Habermas, *Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 12.

76. Kimberle Williams Crenshaw, “Toward a Race-Conscious Pedagogy in Legal Education,” *National Black Law Journal* 11, no. 1 (1988): 2.

acceptance of the force of the better argument. These qualities coincide with those often presented in the context of philosophy of science: the readiness to account for others' critique, for example, is often offered as a standard that ought to apply to all scientific research, and that also functions as a means of distinguishing legitimate scientific critique and dissent from illegitimate forms of criticism.<sup>77</sup>

The emphasis on openness to critique is particularly important from the perspective of justifying the epistemic claims of decolonization: in other words, the fusion of the epistemic and normative aspects of decolonization has in some cases resulted in the view that criticizing the epistemic claims presented by subordinated groups is morally problematic. Here, I side with Siegel who argues that moral respect for the members of subordinated groups does not prohibit criticism of their epistemic claims.<sup>78</sup> It is both a moral and epistemic requirement to take these claims seriously but, just as with any other claim, the claims presented by members of these groups should be open to criticism insofar as they take part in scientific practices. In this sense, criticizing the epistemically problematic views of subordinated groups — granted that such critique should be presented in a respectful way and in accordance with shared epistemic standards — should be seen as part of normal scientific practice, just as critique of predominant views by those in subordinated positions is. In fact, the critique of subordinated groups' views can itself show that those views *are* being taken seriously. It is also important to emphasize that impartiality functions in favor of subordinated groups in situations where the predominant views are distorted by collective bias. This is because an impartial examination of the subject matter of inquiry by definition takes into account all available epistemic viewpoints and is thus able to detect and challenge biased or one-sided views, including those of the dominant groups.

To conclude so far, I suggest that the justification of the epistemic claims of decolonization is conditional on the acceptance of the following epistemic standards: first, the criterion of impartiality, which is closely associated with the recognition of fallibility of knowledge and openness to critique; and second, in the case of objective claims, the pragmatic truth criterion. From an educational viewpoint, an important question is to what extent these criteria that regulate the *formation* of knowledge should also apply to educational contexts and the curriculum. This question is directly associated with the question of the relative value of justice- and truth-seeking aims of the university: the university is not only an institution dedicated to the pursuit of truth and knowledge; it also has other institutional aims, such as those related to advancing social justice and educational aims that are largely, but not solely, associated with the transmission of knowledge and understanding. In many cases, these different aims can be reconciled without difficulty on the level of educational practices and the curriculum. For example, in many disciplines, the attempt to advance social justice through

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77. Kristen Intemann and Inmaculada de Melo-Martín, "Are There Limits to Scientists' Obligations to Seek and Engage Dissenters?," *Synthese* 191, no. 12 (2014): 2755.

78. Siegel, "Epistemological Diversity and Education Research," 8–9.



the inclusion of underrepresented perspectives also serves the aim of pursuing truth and knowledge. In the example of history, while the inclusion of histories of oppressed peoples, such as indigenous peoples, to the history curriculum is necessary from the normative perspective of egalitarian inclusion, it is equally important from the epistemic perspective of acquiring knowledge. This is because forming a comprehensive understanding of the history of a society requires understanding not only the historical triumphs and golden ages but also the histories of wrongdoing and oppression associated with the collective past of a society.

However, there may also be situations in which the epistemic aims of the university collide with those associated with social justice: especially in the past, it has been characteristic of the epistemic aims to be prioritized at the expense of social justice. In fact, as the project of decolonization demonstrates, only recently has the unjust nature of many institutional practices of universities been acknowledged and an adequate balance between the different aims of the university been sought. However, opposite situations are also imaginable: for instance, the normative imperative to advance social justice might sometimes be so strong that it begins to impair the formation and transmission of knowledge. Constructing a curriculum always requires making choices between different topic areas and, under the conditions of scarce resources (e.g., the lack of teaching personnel or inadequate time reserved for teaching), the inclusion of some material for social justice purposes might result in cutting topic areas or contents that would be more useful for students from an epistemic perspective. Similarly, strong advocacy of social justice ideals might restrict students' openness to alternative theoretical or epistemic perspectives and thus prevent them from engaging in open discussion about, and critical evaluation of, those alternative approaches.

In these situations, the Habermasian distinction between objective and normative validity can serve as a useful analytical tool for distinguishing and evaluating the justification of different types of validity claims involved. For instance, this distinction might help to determine which types of claims should be given more weight in different situations, and what might be the benefits and losses of prioritizing one type of claim over another in a particular historical and social context. Moreover, recognizing and openly discussing the fact that there are different and conflicting objectives involved in research and higher education may result in the creation of novel practices through which such conflicts can be resolved without significantly impairing the achievement of either normative or epistemic aims. For instance, there are various different ways in which social justice can be advanced through pedagogical practices and in the curriculum without interfering with the processes of knowledge production or delimiting students' access to relevant bodies of knowledge. However, remaining faithful to the spirit of the Habermasian understanding of just social institutions, it cannot be determined in advance or from the outside how these conflict situations should be resolved. Rather, these issues — such as the relative importance of social justice and the pursuit of knowledge — should be determined through an open and egalitarian discussion among the members of the university institution, bearing in mind the global and temporal

dimensions of justice as well as the necessary epistemic standards involved in knowledge formation.

### CONCLUSIONS

In this article, my aim has been to examine the justification of the different types of validity claims involved in decolonizing the university from the perspective of Habermas's distinction between objective and normative validity. What I hope to have demonstrated here is that, while recognizing that knowledge formation and scientific research are inevitably value-laden, sustaining normative and epistemic validity claims as analytically separable may prove helpful in evaluating the justification of not only decolonization but also other social justice movements that are emerging in the context of contemporary universities. This analytical distinction might help to avoid both the blunt rejection of such movements as normatively or epistemically untenable as well as an unquestioned acceptance of such claims by these movements that should, for good reasons, be subjected to more careful examination and justification. Moreover, I also hope to have highlighted the importance of sustaining both epistemic and normative criteria that are not reducible to any single epistemic or normative community or perspective. The existence of context-transcending criteria of validity (whether justification-immanent or justification-transcendent), such as those represented by the Habermasian concepts of truth and moral rightness, is vitally important in the attempt by universities as educational and research institutions to resist the normative and epistemic parochialism and closed-mindedness that decolonization is directed against.