

Diverse Viewpoints, One Truth

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Lots of people are committed to the intellectual value of diversity, especially when it comes to elevating the voices of those in the minority. At the same time, lots of people are *also* committed to the idea that we are living in a [post-truth world](#) and [should abandon](#) the ideal of truth. Those two commitments are inconsistent. Diversity is intellectually valuable only when there is a truth to be discovered.

Diversity is valuable for lots of reasons. For example, people living in a diverse environment tend to be more empathetic towards those who are different from them. And empowering people from marginalised groups can serve political goals—such as making a legislative process fairer or providing people with social prestige. But many of us think that diversity has an intellectual value as well. By allowing for diverse viewpoints, we can learn things about ourselves and the world that would otherwise slip under our radar. Those in power, or in the majority, may be blind to important features of our world that those in less privileged positions can see more clearly.

My own discipline, philosophy, has been invigorated by the introduction of the theoretical framework known as *standpoint epistemology*, which holds that how each person sees the world—and therefore, what they *know*—is shaped by who they are and where they are. For example, powerful members of society know things that those with little power don't—and vice versa. President Putin knows much about the war in Ukraine that a citizen of Kyiv does not, but the citizen of Kyiv could presumably also teach the president of Russia quite a lot that he would find surprising.

Yet despite the interest in the intellectual value of diversity, many people are shifting away from talking about *the* truth and moving towards talking about *my truth* and *your truth*. This is not a new idea: for example, novelist Gustave Flaubert writes that [there is no truth](#), only perspective. According to this mindset, there's no truth out there—just competing narratives. You have your truth, and I have mine.

But the idea that diversity is intellectually important is inconsistent with the idea that there is no truth. Perspectives matter because they are perspectives on *something*. If there's nothing to have a perspective on, perspectives are intellectual dead weight. Bringing people from different backgrounds and walks of life together to share their perspectives won't help you to think more accurately about the world unless there really is a world out there to think about.

It's easiest to see the problem in terms of belief revision. Suppose you attend a forum on racism and hear from people with diverse perspectives on the issue. You conclude that some of your previous ideas were wrong, and you revise your beliefs given some of the things that you learned. That revision either makes your worldview more accurate or not. If not, then there's no need to revise your view: no perspective is any more accurate than the one you already have. If so, that must be because your view of the world got closer to the way the world really is.

From a theoretical perspective, diversity supports truth-seeking somewhat as a representative sample in a scientific experiment does. Just as using a single datapoint yields very limited information, so does

a single viewpoint. The tendency for any given individual to have only a limited, distorted view of the truth is known as the *Rashomon effect*. Engaging seriously with a wide range of perspectives yields better information about reality in the same way that discerning patterns and trend lines in large data sets does.

There are lots of contexts in which the accuracy of our thinking is improved by bringing diverse voices into the conversation. Groups of judges that include both Republican and Democratic appointees [craft more reasonable and moderate opinions](#) than those that are less diverse. Firms that include employee perspectives in decision-making [outperform](#) those that don't. In philosophy, our views about what make [a life worth living](#) have been improved by including the perspectives of those who are disabled rather than focusing exclusively on what makes life good for able-bodied people.

So, while listening compassionately to people's perspectives may increase empathy and produce other social goods, it doesn't provide an intellectual benefit unless it is able to improve the accuracy of our stock of beliefs. The intellectual value of diversity is an epistemic one—a diversity of voices makes it more likely that the truth will not be overlooked. If there's one truth, and yet you and I disagree on what that truth is, we have good reason to pay attention to one another's points of view: *I see the world this way. You see it differently. We can't both be right, so let's think through it together.*

Standpoint epistemology, like diversity, is useful for understanding the world only if there are truths that can be revealed by reconciling the perspectives of people who see the world from different standpoints. For example, some people talk as if there's such a thing as *men's truth*, *women's truth*, *blacks' truth* and *whites' truth*. But if there is no truth to be mutually discovered, why should people in one group bother listening to people in another group? And why should one group's views on anything be given *more weight* than the views of people in other groups—if, indeed, it makes sense to talk about the views of a group at all, since the beliefs of individuals within that group can differ widely. Many people in the US believe that a black person's views on racism in America should be given more evidentiary weight than a white person's views, for example. But even if all black Americans shared the same views on this, that makes no sense unless there is a truth to be closer to.

Standpoint epistemology is helpful only if our situation affects what we know. The idea that a marginalised person has privileged access to truths about the world makes sense only if there are objective truths about the world out there to have privileged access to. For, while our perspectives on the world are diverse, the truth is not. Giving up on truth undercuts the intellectual value of diversity and confounds the project of standpoint epistemology.