

The moral argument for factual realism

Alan Sokal

Department of Mathematics
University College London
Gower Street
London WC1E 6BT
UNITED KINGDOM
`sokal@math.ucl.ac.uk`

Department of Physics
New York University
726 Broadway
New York, NY 10003
USA
`sokal@nyu.edu`

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Six decades ago — when I was still in elementary school — Karl Popper wrote the following eloquent paragraph:

The belief of a liberal — the belief in the possibility of a rule of law, of equal justice, of fundamental rights, and a free society — can easily survive the recognition that judges are not omniscient and may make mistakes about facts and that, in practice, absolute justice is hardly ever realized in any particular legal case. But this belief in the possibility of a rule of law, of justice, and of freedom, can hardly survive the acceptance of an epistemology which teaches that there are no objective facts; not merely in this particular case, but in any other case; and that the judge cannot have made a factual mistake because he [*sic*] can no more be wrong about the facts than he can be right.¹

This “moral argument for factual realism” — as Nicholas Maxwell has illuminatingly called it² — may not be the most direct or compelling argument in favor of realism in ontology and epistemology, any more than the existence of modern technology is the cleanest or strongest argument in favor of the approximate truth of the underlying basic scientific theories. But it is a powerful argument nonetheless, at least to those of us who accept the moral framework of philosophical liberalism (very broadly defined).

But what of those who don't? For instance, many self-described partisans of Social Justice are nowadays decidedly lukewarm in their support of — or even overtly hostile to — traditional liberal values like free and open debate on matters of public concern, whenever that debate appears to collide with values that they consider more pressing, like the protection of racial and sexual minorities from real or alleged psychic “harm”.³ At the same time, many of these same Social Justice activists, philosophically influenced by postmodernism and its progenies, are profoundly skeptical — if not actively disdainful — of the concept of objective reality.⁴ Can we reformulate the moral argument for factual realism in a way that would be convincing to them? (Or rather, in a way that *should* be convincing to them, logically, whether or not it *would* be convincing to them, psychologically.) I think we can.

¹Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (Basic Books, New York, 1963), p. 5.

²Nicholas Maxwell, How can life of value best flourish in the real world?, in Leemon McHenry, ed., *Science and the Pursuit of Wisdom: Studies in the Philosophy of Nicholas Maxwell* (Ontos Verlag, Frankfurt, 2009), pp. 1–56: quotation at p. 13.

³An extreme example of this hostility to free debate is the practice of some (not all) advocates of gender self-identification (that is, the idea that self-declared gender identity should supplant biological sex for all legal and social purposes) to tar gender-critical feminists (that is, feminists who believe that biological sex matters, at least for some purposes) as TERFs (Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists) and transphobes, and even as the (inadvertent) objective allies of fascists. See, for instance, BBC News, Stonewall boss defends new strategy amid criticism, 29 May 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-57281448>; Judith Butler (interview with Jules Gleeson), We need to rethink the category of woman, 7 September 2021, <https://illwill.com/rethink-the-category-of-woman>. For further background, see Judith Suissa and Alice Sullivan, The gender wars, academic freedom and education, *Journal of Philosophy of Education* **55**(1), 55–82 (2021).

⁴See, for instance, the many citations in Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay, *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything About Race, Gender, and Identity – and Why This Harms Everybody* (Pitchstone, Durham, North Carolina, 2020).

Feminist philosopher Kelly Oliver has argued that

in order to be revolutionary, feminist theory cannot claim to describe what exists, or, “natural facts.” Rather, feminist theories should be political tools, strategies for overcoming oppression in specific concrete situations. The goal, then, of feminist theory, should be to develop *strategic* theories — not true theories, not false theories, but strategic theories.⁵

But as Jean Bricmont and I observed many years ago, this attempt to liberate inquiry about the natural and social world from the goal of objectivity cannot work. For how can one know whether or not a theory is “strategic”, except by asking whether it is *truly, objectively* efficacious in promoting one’s declared political goals? The problems of truth and objectivity cannot, in fact, be evaded so easily; at most they can be displaced.⁶

I would like to argue here that the moral argument for factual realism has force not only for adherents to a liberal (broadly defined) political philosophy, but in fact for all people who believe that some social arrangements are better than others — in short, that is, for just about everyone, and in particular for the self-described advocates of Social Justice.

Any argument claiming that one social arrangement is more ethical, or more just, than another necessarily has two parts: a normative aspect, that is, a general conception (even if not fully articulated) of ethics and justice, which would allow us to say which outcomes are more ethically desirable and which are less so; and an empirical aspect, arguing that particular social choices — be they large-scale options like capitalism or socialism, or specific decisions like policies on taxation or employment or health care or climate — are likely to result in particular outcomes.

Of course, one serious sticking point in public debate is likely to be the normative part: leftists, conservatives and libertarians have very different ideas about what constitutes justice (at least on economic matters). But even when people are agreed on normative questions — as they sometimes are — the empirical analysis cannot be avoided. Which energy policies will minimize the rise in global temperatures over the next decades? Which public-health policies will minimize the number of deaths from Covid-19?⁷ These questions cannot even be sensibly posed, much less satisfactorily answered, without a belief in the objective reality of the natural and social worlds, and of their properties. Such a belief is quite simply a prerequisite for rational decision-making. And in a democracy, rational decision-making requires that there be a wide consensus, not only on the existence of an objective reality, but also on its details. As the old-fashioned (but still true) saying goes, everyone is entitled to their own opinion, but not to their own facts.

⁵Kelly Oliver, Keller’s gender/science system: Is the philosophy of science to science as science is to nature?, *Hypatia* 3(3), 137–148 (1988): quotation at p. 146, emphasis in the original.

⁶Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Intellectual Impostures: Postmodern Philosophers’ Abuse of Science* (Profile Books, London, 1998), p. 246.

⁷Of course, the desiderata in these cases are far more complex than simply temperature rise and deaths, respectively. The purpose here is simply to give some examples of the hundreds of factual questions that must be posed — and tentatively answered — as part of any rational social decision-making process.

However, all this applies only under the assumption that the proximate goal of politics is to *persuade* one's fellow citizens by rational arguments. (The next step after persuasion could be — depending on the circumstances — electoral politics, mass demonstrations, civil disobedience, workers' strikes, or many other tactics, including the formation of coalitions. But first one has to persuade people.) And this reliance on persuasion is grounded, ethically, on the idea that each of our fellow citizens is equally deserving of the same fundamental democratic right: namely, to use his or her own brain to evaluate the competing policy options on the basis of the best available evidence, weighed in the light of his or her own ethical values, and to have those evaluations be counted in social decision-making.

But this notion of democratic rational persuasion may, alas, be merely a quaint hangover from the liberal philosophy that increasingly many people, on both left and right, today reject. What can we say to people who have given up on the liberal concept of persuasion and, convinced of the supreme rightness of their cause, simply aim to enact their preferred policies by some combination of clever deception, social coercion, bureaucratic fiat and/or violent force?

Here is one possible answer: Even if you reject the democratic idea that your fellow citizens deserve the same rights as you, you will still demand those rights for yourself. *You* would not be happy if significant aspects of your life were to be imposed on you by deception, coercion, fiat or force. *You* would want to use your own brain to rationally evaluate the competing policy options on the basis of the best available evidence, weighed in the light of *your own* ethical values. (Unless, that is, you are content to parrot what people around you are saying, without really thinking it through for yourself.) And that means that *you* still need factual realism as a basis for *your own* deliberations, even if you don't recognize the right of others to do the same, or if you seek to prevent their evaluations from being counted in social decision-making (perhaps because you consider those people to be ethically or intellectually inferior to yourself).

This is not a pretty argument; it is much less high-minded than Popper's. But that is, alas, the unfortunate necessity. It pains me that many political and social activists today — on both “left” and “right” — consider people who disagree with them to be ethically or intellectually inferior. I am incensed that an American presidential candidate — the one that I even voted for, as the lesser by far of two evils — casually labeled half of her opponent's supporters as a “basket of deplorables . . . They're racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic”. I am appalled that the audience at the LGBT fundraising event where this slur was uttered responded to it with *laughter and applause*.⁸ And don't even get me started on the hatred and lies emanating from the other side.

But even for people who reject philosophical liberalism in theory or in deed, the moral argument for factual realism still has force.

⁸A full transcript of this speech can be found at <https://time.com/4486502/hillary-clinton-basket-of-deplorables-transcript/>; videos of the relevant excerpt can be found at that site and also at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PCHJVE9trSM>.