

## Review of Catherine Elgin's *True Enough*

John Bengson

(To appear in *Mind*)

The stated objective of Catherine Elgin's latest book, *True Enough*, is to “develop a holistic epistemology that accommodates the cognitive contributions of science” and other disciplines (1).<sup>1</sup> This statement elides two distinctive features of Elgin's position, in addition to its holism: first, it puts understanding, rather than knowledge or justification, “first”; second, it holds that although understanding is the epistemic goal of inquiry, it is “not factive”. (I elucidate both features below.)

Throughout Elgin contrasts her position with a broadly truth-centered, veritistic or factivist<sup>2</sup> epistemology, whose myriad forms she deems unable to accommodate science's reliance on “models, idealizations, and thought experiments that are known not to be true” (1). This is the book's central thesis. In the course of defending it, Elgin offers detailed discussions of examples drawn from science, history, literature, film, painting, music, and dance. There is even an extensive—and quite interesting—analysis of a war memorial, and a lengthy discussion of intellectual integrity (addressing topics such as plagiarism, fabrication, peer review, and conflicts of interest in scientific research). These are not the only, or most far-reaching, respects in which *True Enough* is unconventional from the perspective of mainstream epistemology. Elgin advocates “radical revisions” within the field: not only must truth and truth-conduciveness be “dethroned” (2), “belief, assertion, and knowledge should be sidelined” (9).

The book's main argument for its central thesis is simple: Science and other disciplines rely on representations that possess two key features. First, they are false, diverging from the truth. Second, they promote understanding, the epistemic goal of inquiry. They also sometimes possess a third key feature: they promote understanding not in spite of, but in virtue of, their falsity. According to Elgin, this contradicts veritism. (I assess this argument below, after summarizing Elgin's positive view.)

Elgin first presented this argument in a series of papers: “True Enough” (2004),

---

<sup>1</sup> All unmarked page references are to Elgin's *True Enough*.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout I follow Elgin in using these labels, as well as the terms ‘truth’ and ‘fact’, interchangeably.

“Understanding and the Facts” (2007), and “Is Understanding Factive?” (2009). *True Enough* offers replies to a few objections raised in subsequent literature (by Jonathan Kvanvig, Michael Strevens, and others).<sup>3</sup> While it is unlikely that all of the objectors to whom Elgin replies will be convinced, I suspect that her defenses will be appealing to those who share her pragmatic leanings. These will be familiar to readers of her 1996 monograph *Considered Judgment* and her earlier books, one of which was co-authored with Nelson Goodman—whose influence, like that of W.V.O. Quine, reverberates throughout *True Enough*. As noted above, the further development of Elgin’s positive view is the stated objective of *True Enough*, and is its principal advance over the earlier papers and books.

### 1. The Positive View: True Enough, Understanding, and Holism

At the heart of Elgin’s positive view are, I think, three main theses (or what I will reconstruct as such). The first elucidates the notion of being true enough:

**Thesis 1:** Being true enough does not entail being true;  $R$  is true enough with respect to  $\varphi$  to, and only to, the extent that  $R$  is “close enough to the truth” about  $\varphi$ , where  $R$  is close enough to the truth about  $\varphi$  to, and only to, the extent that  $R$  is false with respect to  $\varphi$  (i.e.,  $R$  represents  $\varphi$  as being  $F$ , and  $\varphi$  is not  $F$ ), but its falsity is “irrelevant” or “negligible” for current cognitive purposes. (16 and *passim*)

Here  $R$  could be a sentence, proposition, commitment, account, model, diagram, painting, film, dance, memorial, and so on. According to Elgin, such entities regularly qualify as true enough through a mechanism she calls ‘exemplification’:  $R$  exemplifies a range of features of its target in a given context to, and only to, the extent that  $R$  functions in that context to “highlight” or “display” those features.<sup>4</sup> (Paradigm example: a color chip card.) How it highlights does not matter. If what is not highlighted is irrelevant or negligible for current cognitive purposes, then  $R$  is true enough.

The notion of being true enough is integral to Elgin’s theory of understanding. This brings us to the second main thesis:

---

<sup>3</sup> The objection I present below, in §2, goes unmentioned.

<sup>4</sup> See esp. ch. 9. Elgin also uses a range of other expressions: ‘exhibits’, ‘points to’, ‘draws attention to’, ‘makes manifest’, ‘makes salient’, ‘underscores’.

**Thesis 2:** An account  $A$  qualifies as a (fully adequate) understanding of  $\varphi$  for some subject  $S$  to, and only to, the extent that  $A$  is (i) coherent, (ii) grounded in  $S$ 's antecedent inclinations, and (iii) true enough with respect to  $\varphi$ .

As anticipated above, Elgin maintains that the understanding in this thesis is the epistemic goal of inquiry. Such understanding is “objectual” or “disciplinary”, by which she means that it relates a subject not to a proposition but rather to “a topic, discipline, or subject matter” (43).<sup>5</sup> When one understands a fact, or why it holds, one does so “derivatively”, in virtue of understanding a topic, discipline, or subject matter that encompasses the fact, or its explanation (*ibid.*). In fact, disciplinary understanding needn't be explanatory. Elgin's defense of this last claim cites a wide variety of cases: “purely descriptive” historical narratives, memorials, and paintings (e.g., Goya's *The Disasters of War*); sports (e.g., the Celtics' defensive strategy); physical structures (e.g., the New York subway system); morality; and mathematics.<sup>6</sup>

Now for Elgin's third main thesis, which treats the epistemic status of individual commitments as derivative upon the epistemic status of the accounts—the “constellation of commitments” (113)—to which they belong:

**Thesis 3:** A particular commitment is epistemically acceptable for  $S$  to, and only to, the extent that the account of  $S$ 's to which it belongs satisfies (i) – (iii) in Thesis 2.

This thesis simultaneously expresses Elgin's holism and her affirmation of an understanding-first epistemology. (Relatedly, it reveals the significance of Thesis 2: it is the core of her positive view.) Although Elgin sometimes formulates the third pillar of her

---

<sup>5</sup> But Elgin sometimes says that its object—what it is an adequate understanding *of*—is a “body of information” (44), which is not the same: there is Persia, or oxidation, or dance, and then there is a body of information about each of these things. Perhaps Elgin's idea is that the body of the information is the content, not the object, of the understanding. But that would introduce the possibility that (with respect to content) the understanding is propositional, after all, which runs counter to the spirit if not the letter of Elgin's view of understanding (elucidated in chs. 3-4). At any rate, the distinction between the object and content of understanding does not receive discussion.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., 37, 42-4, 197-9, and 284. Elgin also affirms several of Peter Lipton's (2009) examples.

epistemology using the notions of justification and warrant, she more often employs the vocabulary of “epistemic acceptability”, or what an agent ought to accept, which serves as her unexplicated, seemingly catch-all category for the positive epistemic status of a particular commitment.<sup>7</sup>

Having identified what I take to be the main elements of Elgin’s positive view, a (protracted) caveat is in order. Sometimes Elgin explicitly asserts all three of the theses I’ve enumerated, and clearly marks all three of the conditions listed above in Thesis 2 (or, they’re suggested by her use of nearby expressions or metaphors: ‘hang together’, ‘mesh’, ‘coalesce’, ‘fit’, ‘integrated’, ‘interconnected’, etc.). But at other times she presents herself as explicating understanding and epistemic acceptability in terms of other notions, each of which would potentially infuse her theory with an altogether different content. For example:

a. *Know-how*: Over the course of several sections of Chapter 3, Elgin endorses a dispositional analysis of know-how and claims that understanding  $\varphi$  “involves” (or, she also suggests, “is or is akin to”) “know[ing] how to exploit the information or insight one’s understanding provides” (46), that is, to possess “a disposition to reason well about a topic in a range of relevant circumstances” (47).<sup>8</sup> Whereas conditions (i) – (iii) in Thesis 2 focus on *possession* of a constellation of commitments, here Elgin emphasizes what one is disposed to *do*—indeed, *do well*—with that constellation. However, between these there seems to be a gap, one that would be salient in a scenario in which a subject possesses an account that is coherent, grounded in antecedent inclinations, and true enough, even though the subject is indisposed to reason well with that account. Such a possibility is important insofar as it seems to imply that the understanding can’t involve (or be, or be akin to) the disposition.<sup>9</sup> (I describe two other objections in

---

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., the general formulations of holism on 12-13 and 70-1. While I myself find the notion of epistemic acceptability dubious, I will not dwell on this here.

<sup>8</sup> Literature on know-how from the past two decades is brimming with objections to dispositional analyses (*disclosure*: I have contributed to this literature), though these are absent from *True Enough*. Equally surprisingly, Elgin’s treatment of the connection between understanding and know-how does not discuss, nor cite, Alison Hills’ important work on this connection (see, e.g., Hills 2009 and 2016); *cp.* Zagzebski (2009, §6.II) and the citations therein.

<sup>9</sup> Is the gap traversed by Elgin’s claim that an account is a set not of beliefs but rather ‘acceptances’. Building on L. Jonathan Cohen’s treatment, Elgin explicates the notion of acceptance in terms of a willingness and ability “to deploy it [whatever one accepts] when one’s ends are cognitive” (19-20). This

the footnote.<sup>10</sup>)

*b. Reflective equilibrium.* At several points Elgin suggests that “understanding of a topic consists in accepting a system of commitments in reflective equilibrium”, where “a network of commitments is in reflective equilibrium when each of its elements is reasonable in light of the others, and the network as a whole is as reasonable as any available alternative in light of our relevant previous commitments” (3-4; see also Chapter 4). It is not obvious that this is equivalent to Thesis 2. First, it appears not to entail that thesis, since it seems to leave out condition (iii). I suspect, though, that Elgin will not be much bothered by viewing that condition as augmenting rather than competing with reflective equilibrium. So more importantly, second, given its demand for each element’s reasonableness, the reflective equilibrium claim appears not to be entailed by Thesis 2, which is silent about the epistemic status of the individual commitments that compose an account. Perhaps the reflective equilibrium claim is meant to be entailed by the conjunction of Thesis 2 and the holism of Thesis 3. However, the reflective equilibrium claim seems to imply that a particular element of an account receives epistemic assessment (viz., it is reasonable or not) *independently* of the epistemic assessment of the account of which it is an element, contrary to the central tenet of holism.<sup>11</sup>

*c. Communities and collectives:* In Chapter 5 Elgin endorses a social condition on epistemic acceptability: it “requires standing not just in a suitable relation to the phenomenon that she [an individual subject] seeks to know or understand, but also in a suitable relation to other members of the epistemic community” (121). In

---

does not eliminate the gap. For being *willing and able to deploy* an account when one’s ends are cognitive does not secure what Elgin claims to be needed, viz., a *disposition to reason well* with that account.

<sup>10</sup> First, consider an agent with practical understanding—for example, a skilled knuckleballer, whose understanding consists in the grasp of a particular pitch. (As indicated above, Elgin recognizes such understanding.) The knuckleballer’s understanding may be bound up with various dispositions. But it is not obvious that the disposition to *reason well* about the pitch must be one of them. Second, when one’s understanding of  $\varphi$  (chemistry, genetics, medicine, dance, etc.) is bound up with a disposition to reason well, we can ask: why is one disposed to reason well about  $\varphi$ ? Answer: *because* one understands  $\varphi$ . This implies that the disposition holds in virtue of—is explained by—the understanding. This seems to contradict the proposal that the understanding holds in virtue of the disposition.

<sup>11</sup> A similar worry attends to Elgin’s Scanlonian analysis, in Chapter 5, of a consideration’s qualifying as a reason for a particular proposition, in terms of what a competent and motivated assessor could not responsibly reject. It is not clear how this thesis is compatible with holism.

Chapter 6 Elgin voices another social condition: “Acceptability derives from satisfying the interlocking network of standards science sets for itself, standards that are grounded in an evolving collective understanding of the scientific enterprise and of the difficulties to be encountered in pursuing its goals.” (140) I was unable to puzzle out how these social conditions cohere with Theses 2 and 3, which make no mention of communities or collectives.<sup>12</sup>

I enter this protracted caveat in part to illustrate the breadth and complexity of *True Enough*. It also illustrates the following complaints: *True Enough* contains a number of claims, about sundry topics, whose relations are often opaque. It employs, and moves back and forth between, a range of prima facie non-synonymous terms whose meanings and referents are not always made clear. And it relies heavily on ambiguous or obscure connectives (e.g., ‘derives from’, ‘involves’, ‘figures in’, ‘is a matter of’, ‘embodies’, ‘is or is akin to’). Additionally, its scholarship is seriously incomplete, and sometimes simply odd.<sup>13</sup> Such breadth of coverage, diversity of expression, and airy scholarship sometimes enable lively prose, quicken the pace, and foster a sense of exploration and discovery. But they also frequently serve as barriers to fluid comprehension and assessment. These features of *True Enough* are likely to frustrate some readers, and—to return to the initial point of the caveat—they pose a challenge for any reconstruction of Elgin’s theory that strives for both accuracy and precision.

A point in favor of the reconstruction provided by Theses 1-3 is that they illuminate Elgin’s suggestion that although her theory dethrones truth and truth-conduciveness, it avoids popular objections to coherence theories by recognizing not one but two “tethers”.<sup>14</sup> These appear in what I’ve labeled conditions (ii) and (iii) of Thesis 2.

---

<sup>12</sup> Both social conditions appear in the middle chapters of *True Enough*, during a discussion of science and the demands of objectivity and intellectual integrity. As far as I can tell, they do little to no work elsewhere in the discussion. Perhaps they are meant to apply only to collective inquiry, though such a restriction is never mentioned, and Elgin’s ambitions are often presented in more general terms.

<sup>13</sup> Two examples of incompleteness are given in note 8 above. Another example is the absence of references to the vast, and often quite rigorous, literature on closeness to the truth (verisimilitude). Engagement with recent work on epistemic value, pragmatic encroachment, and relativism would also have been apt. While Elgin seeks to manage expectations early on (2), it seems to me—and plausibly follows from Elgin’s own treatment of standards for inquiry in Chapters 5 and 6—that the norms of scholarship she contravenes are not optional. As for oddity: to offer one example, Elgin appends to her assertion that “shape is always accompanied by color” (192) a citation to the whole of *Plato: The Complete Works*, which contains over forty works spanning more than 1700 pages.

<sup>14</sup> See 183-4. Elgin does not elaborate on the objections, but the context suggests that she has in mind so-called ‘isolation’, ‘input,’ or ‘no contact with reality’ worries about coherentist theories of justification and

First, the initial inclinations in (ii) serve as unconstrained constrainers (*not*: unjustified justifiers), ensuring that a coherent account “answers to something outside itself” (183); they play this role non-*veritistically*, regardless of their etiology, track-record, content, modal profile (safety, sensitivity, adherence, etc.), or phenomenology. Second, condition (iii) asserts that the account must be true enough; this entails that it must “answer to the facts” (184), but not in the way demanded by *veritism*. In sum, these two conditions entail that coherence is insufficient for realization of the epistemic goal of inquiry, without capitulating to *veritism*.

## 2. The Main Argument

Having summarized Elgin’s positive view, it is now time to confront her main argument, summarized above, for the book’s central thesis. *Veritism* is unable to make sense of the cognitive contributions of science and other fields, she argues, because such contributions frequently occur via false accounts that promote understanding. (Elgin dubs these ‘felicitous falsehoods’.) The argument does double duty as an argument for Elgin’s positive view—in particular, Thesis 2, which explicitly countenances such accounts by demanding not truth, but truth enough.

Elgin offers two principal defenses of the steps in her argument. First, she proposes a

dimension along which we can measure greater and lesser understanding that factivists cannot take on board. It involves conceding that some accounts, even though they are not true, nonetheless display a measure of understanding. The growth of understanding often involves a trajectory from contentions that, although strictly false, are in the right general neighborhood to contentions that are closer to the truth. (59)

She illustrates with the following example:

Despite the fact that Copernicus’s central claim [that the Earth travels around the sun in a circular orbit] was strictly false, the account it belongs to constitutes a major advance in understanding over the Ptolemaic account it supplanted. Kepler’s and Newton’s accounts are further advances in understanding, and the

---

knowledge. For recent statements, see Kelly and McGrath (2010, 333) and Berker (2015, 333).

current account is yet a further advance. ... With each step in the sequence, we understand the motion of the planets better than we did before. (60)

Second, Elgin claims to find

Another aspect of science [that] is even more troublesome for the factive view—namely, science’s penchant for idealization. The ideal gas law accounts for the behavior of gases by describing the behavior of a gas composed of dimensionless, spherical molecules that are not subject to friction and exhibit no intermolecular attraction. ... There are no such things. Indeed, as far as we can now tell, there could be no such things. But the ideal gas law figures in the understanding provided by thermodynamics ... Scientists purport to understand the phenomena in terms of these laws. (61)

Importantly for Elgin, idealizations such as the ideal gas law are different from approximations such as Copernicus’s. The latter possess the first and second features mentioned above: they are false and promote understanding. Idealizations, however, also possess the third feature: they promote understanding not in spite of, but rather in virtue of, their divergence from the facts.

The reason that idealizations are supposed to be more troublesome, then, is that a natural response by the veritist to Elgin’s first defense—namely, while optimal understanding abjures falsehood, “lesser” understandings are still possible, though (crucially for the veritist) they are “lesser” *because* of their falsity—seems unavailable in the case of the second. For, Elgin writes when elaborating the second defense, “The contention that such laws degrade but do not destroy understanding is simply not credible.” (62)

Let’s accept the natural response to Elgin’s first defense and agree that we should look elsewhere for a viable response to the second. To this end, notice that each of the idealizations in question (e.g., the ideal gas law) is regarded by the relevant consumers—the competent scientists who “purport to understand the phenomena in terms of” them—as an idealization. This means that such consumers accept

P1: *R diverges from the facts* (where *R* is the idealization in question).

It also means that they accept that, in the present context, the divergence does not threaten, but rather facilitates, the realization of certain cognitive goals. That is, they



accept

P2: *R's divergence from the facts is negligible for relevant cognitive purposes.*<sup>15</sup>

Were a consumer of the idealization to fail to accept both P1 and P2, he would fail to regard the idealization as an idealization. He would be confused. Not just about the idealization (he thinks the ideal gas law isn't an idealization, though it is), but also, and more importantly, about the phenomenon that the idealization represents. The consumer would conceive of gases as dimensionless, spherical, not subject to friction, etc., and would not realize that this is only a model; he would think that gases really are like this. Perhaps such a consumer would still qualify as possessing "a measure of understanding"—much as in the case of Copernicus. But I submit that his understanding would, like Copernicus's, be "lesser" than the understanding of one who, owing to her acceptance of both P1 and P2, does not make the same errors.

Elgin might press back as follows. Suppose a competent scientist who purports to understand a phenomenon through a given idealization accepts both P1 and P2. But suppose it turns out that one of those propositions is false: in particular, the idealization's divergence is *not* negligible for relevant cognitive purposes (contra P2). Still, Elgin could reasonably contend, the scientist has "a measure of understanding". Once again, let us agree. But notice that the contention just aired fully comports with the above responses. For they allow that in such a case, the scientist has a measure of understanding. They simply append the clarification, implied by veritism, that such understanding is at least to some extent "lesser" than it could be, given the error. Elgin's description of Kepler's "advance" over Copernicus shows recognition that such a clarification is apt.

The two responses I've described point to a general, two-part recipe for not just accommodating but also explaining, in a veritistically-friendly manner, the combination of features identified by Elgin's main argument:

- A. If a subject's account possesses the first two key features but not the third (it is false and, *in spite of this*, it promotes understanding, as in Copernicus-style cases<sup>16</sup>), then the subject's understanding is "lesser" *because* of the falsity of her

---

<sup>15</sup> The resulting account—the one consisting of the idealization and these two propositions, the account possessed by the scientists Elgin cites—is true, and not merely true enough.

<sup>16</sup> I call these 'Copernicus-style cases' because Elgin's primary example is Copernicus. A slightly more extreme example of the same type is given by Elgin's description of an eight year old who accepts that human being evolved from apes (59-60).

account.

- B. If a subject's account possesses all three key features (it is false, promotes understanding, and achieves the latter *in virtue of* the former, as in known-idealization cases), then there is a pair of propositions that the subject accepts, P1 and P2, such that the conjunction of those propositions and the idealization is true, and the account promotes understanding *because* of that whole conjunction.<sup>17</sup> (If the thinker does not accept P1 and P2, or one or both of these propositions is false, then we return to A—it is not a known-idealization case, but rather a Copernicus-style case.)

### 3. Cognitive Advances and Cognitive Purposes

So far I've raised doubts about whether Elgin's objection to veritistic epistemologies—namely, that they are unable to accommodate the cognitive contributions of science and other disciplines that occur via false accounts that promote understanding—is successful. I want to close by suggesting that the objection actually gets things backwards, for it is Elgin's non-veritistic epistemology that mishandles those and other similar contributions.

Suppose that I am a competent scientist who accepts an account satisfying all three conditions in Thesis 2, though I fail to realize that the account's representation *R* of its topic is merely true enough; instead, I regard *R* as true (i.e., I fail to accept P1 and P2.) Now suppose that one of my mentees, who accepts the account, comes to realize that *R* represents the topic falsely, yet still closely enough to the truth for relevant cognitive purposes (i.e., the mentee affirms that *R* is true enough, per P1 and P2). Such a realization constitutes a cognitive advance: because the mentee appreciates that the topic is not the way *R* represents it as being, she grasps the selfsame topic in a way that I (who am confused on this point) do not. Notice, however, that in such a case the mentee's cognitive situation shows no improvement with respect to Thesis 2's three conditions: the mentee's realization does not bring with it improvements in coherence or relations to antecedent inclinations, and it does not affect the fact that (*ex hypothesi*) she and I both accept an

---

<sup>17</sup> Put differently, in B, the account promotes understanding only *partly* in virtue of its falsity. (Or, if this is different, partly in virtue of being an account that has a certain element, which is false.) The *full* explanation, however, must cite P1 and P2, which cancel out the falsity and render the whole account true.

account that represents the topic in a way that is true enough. So, Thesis 2's conditions are equally satisfied in both cases. Yet my mentee understands the topic better than I do.

Let me emphasize that the objection is not simply that Thesis 2 is vulnerable to counterexamples. The main point, rather, is that an account that is true on the whole, insofar as it conjoins a representation of the topic that is merely true enough with acknowledgement of the falsity of that representation, constitutes an *epistemic improvement* over an account that includes the same representation of the same topic, but lacks the acknowledgement—an account that is true enough, but false. If this is correct, then Thesis 2 is unable to accommodate an important style of cognitive advance.<sup>18</sup>

That is one respect in which Thesis 2 fails to account for phenomena that should be covered by an adequate theory of the cognitive contributions of science and other disciplines. I'll now suggest a second, arguably more problematic respect, arising from the cognitive purpose-relativity of Thesis 2's condition (iii).

Elgin recognizes that cognitive purposes are many and diverse. Some are theoretical: inference, argument, prediction, description, explanation, and classification. But others are not. Elgin countenances intentional activities whose cognitive goals include navigating a subway, fixing a car, memorializing a war, writing a novel, and dancing *Trio A*. Importantly, she refrains from affording epistemic privilege to some cognitive purposes over others. Such latitude is less of a choice than a commitment. After all, understanding is Elgin's epistemic yardstick, and on her view possession of understanding is assessed relative to cognitive purposes. This leaves no room to hold that one cognitive purpose is more conducive to the possession of understanding than another, since there is no cognitive purpose-independent perspective on instances of understanding from which to judge one cognitive purpose to be epistemically superior to another. Epistemically, they are either on par or incommensurable.

This seems to make it impossible to accommodate certain cognitive advances. To see this, consider an expert chemist who has cognitive purposes relative to which her coherent, inclination-grounded account of chemistry diverges from the chemical facts in

---

<sup>18</sup> One response is to add a fourth condition to Thesis 2: *S* accepts that *A* is true enough with respect to  $\varphi$ . But this appears to concede victory to veritism. For consider the conjunction of *A* and the acceptance identified in the proposed fourth condition; that conjunction constitutes an account, *A*\*, that is not merely true enough, but true. To say that *A* qualifies as understanding only to the extent that it approximates *A*\*, as the response in question does, seems to enthrone truth.

ways that are negligible. Consider next an eight year old who has different cognitive purposes, ones relative to which her equally coherent and inclination-grounded account of chemistry diverges from the chemical facts in ways that are negligible. Thesis 2 is unable to issue the verdict that the expert's understanding of chemistry is better than the child's. Consequently, it fails to make sense of the advance in understanding that is constitutive of the difference between the neophyte and the expert.

In fact, it undermines the very possibility of this and other apt epistemic comparisons, or at least a wide range of those that epistemologists ought to make sense of. Consider astrology. Elgin writes that “Astronomy affords an understanding of the motions of celestial bodies and their effects; astrology does not” (44). But if the astrologist's cognitive purposes are sufficiently different from the astronomist's, and relative to the astrologist's purposes (whatever they might be: gaining readership, regulating others' beliefs, building a portfolio) any divergence from the facts about the motions of celestial bodies and their effects is negligible, then—according to Thesis 2—the astrologist in possession of a coherent, inclination-grounded account does qualify as understanding those motions and their effects. Further, if Thesis 2 is correct, then an epistemic ranking of the astronomist vis-à-vis the astrologer is compromised. Given that thesis's implication that understanding is purpose-relative, we are unable to achieve the verdict that the understanding of one is better than the understanding of the other. The most that can be said is that their understandings are *different*.

The flaw that I'm claiming to find in Elgin's theory of understanding—and, by implication, her holism—arises not from an abstruse technical detail of her account, but is inherited from its central notion, the namesake of *True Enough*, construed as a replacement for truth.<sup>19</sup> Nor is the flaw a trifling one: I believe that it is a grave theoretical deficiency with considerable real-world significance. The earth is populated by individuals and groups in possession of diverse cognitive purposes, including those that exhibit systematic disregard (or worse) for the truth.<sup>20</sup> Some of these individuals and groups—religious

---

<sup>19</sup> To be clear, I have no objection whatsoever to employing the notion of true enough in epistemology; for example, recall response B to Elgin's argument. (Perhaps I thereby abandon any hope of being a paragon veritist. Good.) What I oppose is an epistemology that—per Theses 1-3—*replaces* truth with truth enough.

<sup>20</sup> Is it possible to idealize away from such purposes (or from the individuals or groups who adopt them)? Yes, but only if there is an epistemic yardstick, independent of the understanding characterized in Thesis 2, that disciplines the idealization. (The idealization must be disciplined on pain of arbitrariness. And if the

fundamentalists, dictators, con-artists, profiteers, Fox News Trumpists—possess cognitive purposes such that the individuals’ and groups’ inclination-grounded, coherent accounts diverge from the facts in ways that turn out to be negligible. For *those* cognitive purposes, the divergences, however vast, do not matter. Elgin’s theory (supposing I have interpreted it correctly—recall my protracted caveat in §1) thus implies that these individuals and groups understand, and that they do so fully adequately; their accounts, along with those accounts’ constituent elements, are epistemically unimpeachable.<sup>21</sup> I submit that any epistemology worthy of the name should loudly and clearly proclaim precisely the opposite.<sup>22</sup>

## References

- Berker, Selim. 2015. “Coherentism via Graphs.” *Philosophical Issues*, 25: 322-52.
- Hills, Alison. 2009. “Moral Testimony and Moral Epistemology.” *Ethics*, 120: 94-127.
- Hills, Alison. 2016. “Understanding Why.” *Noûs*, 50: 661-88.
- Kelly, Thomas and Sarah McGrath. 2011. “Is Reflective Equilibrium Enough?” *Philosophical Perspectives*, 24: 325-59.
- Lipton, Peter. 2009. “Explanation without Understanding.” In H. W. de Regt, S.

---

yardstick is not independent of the (purpose-relative) understanding in Thesis 2, then the “idealization” is on par with or incommensurable to what it “idealizes” from—again, making it arbitrary to privilege the former over the latter.) As emphasized above, Elgin’s position lacks such a yardstick. That her theory can’t support idealizations is one reason to be suspicious of her account of epistemic standards, in Chapter 5, as “norms that would emerge from the deliberations of suitably idealized epistemic agents” (91). (Another reason is that it is not clear how this account—like the analysis of reasons mentioned in note 11—is compatible with Elgin’s holism. See also my comment in §1 on example *c*, to which this account is related.)

<sup>21</sup> In this connection, it may be worth comparing *True Enough* with another book with the same title: Farhad Manjoo’s (2008) best-seller sporting the subtitle “Learning to Live in a Post-Fact Society”. While Manjoo’s *True Enough* is critical of departures from the facts, warns against reliance on gut feelings, and highlights the dangers of what have since been dubbed ‘epistemic bubbles’, Elgin’s *True Enough* licenses divergence from the facts pretty much whenever doing so suits one’s cognitive purposes and coheres internally and with one’s personal inclinations (which, though perhaps not identical to gut feelings, are similarly conative). As far as I can tell, Elgin also condones epistemic bubbles, once again so long as membership affords satisfaction of Thesis 2—which, I’ve been arguing, is not so difficult to achieve, given the purpose-relativity of its condition (iii). At one point Elgin entertains the worry that her view vindicates “isolated islands of claptrap”. Her reply: “the worry is more apparent than real”, because we share “meta-accounts” that rule out “crazy constellations of views” (83-4). Such optimism seems to me difficult to maintain in the face of unrepentant appeals to alternative facts and attacks on evidence-based inquiry—to cite just two threats, both on Manjoo’s radar. Profoundly corrupt “meta-accounts” are not mere creatures of the veritistic imagination.

<sup>22</sup> I am grateful to Stephen Grimm, Mike Titelbaum, and Anat Schechtman, as well as Catherine Elgin and my students in a seminar on understanding at Harvard, where we discussed parts of *True Enough* with the author, for helpful comments and discussion.

Leonelli, and K. Eigner, eds. *Scientific Understanding*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 43-63.

Manjoo, Farhad. 2008. *True Enough: Learning to Live in a Post-Fact Society*. Wiley & Sons.

Zagzebski, Linda. 2009. *On Epistemology*. Wadsworth.