The question of epistemic injustice arose in Latin America before it did in North America. Two hundred years ago, an intense philosophical debate in Cuba addressed the very issue. Armando Hart, who led Cuba’s literacy campaign in 1961–2, unmatched in the world, says no one who disregards the Cuban Philosophical Polemic, 1838–40, understands the Cuban Revolution in the twentieth century (2006: 60). It has to do with epistemic freedom.

This will surprise some. Epistemic injustice itself explains the surprise. Part of the issue, as I suggest below, is that evidence and argument are ineffective against deep-seated expectations. Epistemic injustice includes such expectations, constituting identity. It includes personal investment in such identity. The Cuban debates matter for political freedom, which counters expectations in the North about national identity.

I note two implications of epistemic injustice, so considered: first, epistemic freedom is about how to live, morally and politically. It might seem to be principally about thinking on one’s own. Yet “one’s own” thinking needs discovery. And such discovery depends upon conditions, which often need to be brought about through moral, political and even personal action. Second, it requires faith, or believing what we cannot prove. I explain below.

Cuba in the 1830s was threatened by four global institutions (Conde Rodríguez 2000: 36; Hart Dávalos 2006: 49): Spain took Cuba to define its “national integrity”, slavery was a “necessary evil”, the US considered Cuba its manifest destiny, and England was gaining influence in the Caribbean. All four implied submission for Cuba. All four were dehumanizing.

Cuban philosophers, Félix Varela and José de la Luz y Caballero, had an insight about thinking (Conde Rodríguez 2000: 20; Torres– Cuevas 2004: 329f). They noticed that all thinking, even the supposedly most private, depends upon universals. Universals are general terms like “love”, “freedom”, and “tree”. My thinking may be private, in some sense, but universals are not. They are social. They are shared. In the analytic tradition, we call them kinds (e.g. Wilson 1999). They are general terms unifying particular instances. Non-identical entities form a unity; for example, two books are of the same kind even though they are different colours, shapes, and sizes. When we do not know an entity’s kind, we not only do not know that entity, we sometimes do not see it (e.g. Kuhn 1970: 66).
All knowledge involves judgments about kinds. Any act of deliberation, moral and non-moral, private or social, depends upon kinds, which determine what we understand and how we act (Searle 1995). Some kinds are more empirically rooted than others, but all depend upon social, historical, political, economic and cultural conditions (e.g. Boyd 2010). This is now well-known in analytic philosophy.

It was known earlier to Varela and Luz. They knew imperialism’s “logic” (Rodríguez 2012: 13). As Frantz Fanon argued, European colonialism was not, after all, illogical: if the “natives” are considered non-human, their brutal exploitation does not contradict humanist values (Sartre 1963: 15). His point needs greater attention. Political action, like any action, depends upon kinds – some philosophical – determining what we see and how we know.

Under imperialism, Cubans were non-persons. Understanding universals and imperialism, Varela and Luz knew Cubans’ very thought was a vehicle for oppression. This was because universals arise, as noted, from circumstances and conditions. They were deeply dehumanizing. If activists wanted human liberation, their political movement, to be radical, required understanding thinking.

The philosophical debates of 1838–40 urged the priority of epistemology in school curricula (e.g. Luz y Caballero 1947: 113). Participants in the debates were credited by historians with teaching Cubans how to think (e.g. Torres-Cuevas 2004: 329f). This doesn’t mean they provided ideology. Rather, they clarified the nature of critical thought: it depends upon universals. More adequate universals require political and personal work.

Noam Chomsky remarks that although George Orwell criticized the Soviet Union, the original preface of Animal Farm is about England. Public opinion, Orwell argues, damages free thought and expression more than authoritarian government (Orwell 1943). Thus, those formed in “good schools” have fewer options: precisely due to their formation, they are less able to imagine, let alone live, options counter to social convention.

Varela and Luz, and later José Martí, took the point further. Social orthodoxies constrain individual imagination but so do global structures: The division of the world into persons and non-persons made human liberation, for Latin Americans, hard to expect. It also promoted a view of human beings, including about freedom, which made human liberation, once expected, hard to know (Conde Rodríguez 2000).

It was a view of freedom ignoring the nature of thought and its dependence upon cause and effect. In the early nineteenth century, European philosophers somehow conceived human beings as non-natural, our thinking mythically unaffected by imperialist conditions. The universe is governed by natural laws, but human beings are not, or at least thinking is not.

The upshot was that we live best, non-morally at least, “from the inside”, hearing an “inner voice”. We are free, roughly, if no one gets in our way, an idea called “negative freedom”. That the “inside” is largely a product of the outside, because of causation and kinds, was ignored (Hart Dávalos 2006: 64–5, 129–44). For Cuban philosophers, knowing imperialism, European liberalism was naïve. Martí warned Latin Americans not to be “slaves of Liberty!” (1882/2002a: 50–1), falsely conceived.

According to Fina García Marruz, Martí is distinct among revolutionaries in urging “double redemption” (1968/2011: 406): political freedom required liberation from selves, not for moral reasons but for the sake of knowing human potential. Looking to oneself, Martí wrote, is like being “an oyster in its shell, seeing only the prison that traps him and believing, in the darkness, that it is the world” (1887/2002b: 187). The freedom of European liberals, at the time, was a preposterous elevation of that very prison.
Herein lay epistemic injustice: a way of conceiving oneself that blocked pursuit, or even imagination, of real political freedom. The challenge for Latin America, Martí argued in his famous “Our America”, was that Latin Americans identified with the US. Imperialism, he noted, is like a tiger on velvet paws: It shapes how one sees oneself, giving rise to kinds that are unreliable, at least for human liberation. And it does so unnoticed: “When the prey awakens”, Martí wrote, “the tiger is upon him” (1891/2002c: 292–3).

Martí predated analytic philosophers on an important insight: all aspects of knowing are radically contingent upon circumstances and conditions. To know the world as it is, not just as we expect it to be, depends upon causal connection. We gain knowledge when causal forces act upon us to change our orientation, values or interests. Occasionally, we even possess knowledge before we can articulate it, through feelings and intuitions. Philosophers today call it non-propositional or tacit knowledge.

Martí saw political implications of what some call “embodiment”, the idea that the body thinks. For him, as for Marx, it means we must change the world, even ourselves, to know real human needs. Whether our beliefs about such needs are true depends upon how we act and for what purpose. Martí knew thinking, resulting in knowledge, is “reliably regulated” by cause and effect, to use the jargon of recent (philosophical) times.

We are “herd animals”, as Marx said, because of how we think. “The human being is in the most literal sense a political animal, not merely a gregarious animal, but an animal that can individuate itself only in the midst of society” (1857–58/1978: 223). The radical contingency of knowledge upon circumstances and conditions means individual freedom and self-understanding are not achievable by individuals alone. This is because kinds depend, in part, upon politics.

Even Simón Bolívar, not a philosopher, knew the problem for liberalism as a problem, importantly, about knowledge. He was a liberal, a man of the Enlightenment. But he knew European philosophers were ignorant of what it meant to be “even lower than servitude . . . lost, or worse, absent from the universe” (1815/2003: 19–20). Bolívar raised a question that would not occur to most Europeans: If one is lost or absent from the universe, how is one known? It was not by living from the inside.

Bolívar emphasized strong central government and regional unity, defining direction. “Is it conceivable that a newly liberated people can be launched into the sphere of freedom without their wings disintegrating and hurling them into the abyss, like Icarus?” Bolívar wondered (1815/2003: 23). Real human freedom, because it depends upon thinking, which depends upon institutions, requires real human community. Knowing imperialism, Bolívar knew it had to be fought for.

Martí followed, abandoning liberalism in his youth. Latin American leaders, he argued, must bring about “by means and institutions . . . the desirable state in which every man knows himself and is active” (emphasis added, 1891/2002c: 290). The state in which individuals know themselves, as human beings, needs to be created, fought for, and discovered, through politics and philosophy. This is because of how we think, involving kinds, generated by practises.
knowledge, politically. We should care about knowledge before we care about ethics and politics, and we should do so for the sake of learning about epistemic freedom by looking toward the South.

First, the nature of knowledge is such that imagination is limited by circumstances and conditions, necessarily. Reason works this way. We make choices within a small range of possibilities, dependent upon expectations. Second, science involves faith: it involves believing without sufficient evidence.

To start with the first: in science, natural and social, we investigate events judged plausible. Indeed, all aspects of knowing involve plausibility judgments (Boyd 1999, 2010): If the lights go out, no one asks whether aliens are to blame. Instead, we investigate a small set of options, according to background conditions. This means creativity, giving rise to new options, requires challenging such conditions, including social practises that give rise to expectations and kinds.

For example, in an insufficiently appreciated argument of the 1970s, Hilary Putnam argued that no amount of empirical evidence alone could have displaced Newton before Einstein reconceptualised mass and energy (1975). Although empirical evidence against Newton existed before Einstein, Einstein’s thought experiments – his ideas – made the evidence plausible.

Well-established beliefs cannot be displaced by evidence alone. Counter evidence is explained away. It makes sense. If I release an object and it fails to fall, no one concludes that I have disproved the law of gravity. Instead, observers seek an alternative explanation, such as the existence of an opposing force. If they discover no such force, reasonable people keep looking. They don’t abandon the belief.

Beliefs about people, and non-people, can be similarly deep-seated, insensitive to evidence. It was no wonder, then, that Marti’s independence movement had to be a “revolution in thinking” (Rodríguez 2012: 10). Like his predecessors, Varela and Luz, he took the nature of thinking to be a political priority. Extraordinarily, the Montecristi Manifesto (1895), political statement of the Cuban Revolutionary Party, names “the nature of ideas” an objective of the liberation war (Marti 1895/2002d: 343–4).

Indeed, the Manifesto raises an ancient philosophical question: how to know what it means to be human, and how to know that we know what it means. It is not so odd considering the objective was human liberation. Marti didn’t assume that humanness was known, although it was surely thought to be known. Thus, he claimed that independence was not about “civilization and barbarity” (or “developed” and “developing”) but instead against the “false erudition” that claims to tell us what these are (1891/2002d: 290).

It was about knowledge. Significantly, just before the statement above, Marti writes that “weapons of ideas are more powerful than weapons of steel”. Political freedom required reconceiving human beings and how to live as such. Thus, he urged “una nueva cultura” – a new way of being (Rodríguez 2010: 5). The movement was political but also personal (Rodríguez 2012: 139–40) for the sake of imagination. Given the circumstances, the very conceivability of freedom required new sorts of practises, including individual day to day practises.

The second argument, from analytic philosophy, is that discovery requires faith. It involves believing what cannot yet be fully proved (Kitcher 1982; Eagleton 2009). Scientists, natural and social, believe in the existence of events and phenomena before they have sufficient evidence to justify the belief. They do so to get the evidence.

Fundamental social change, affecting how people live and think, also involves faith. This is because of the point above. In dehumanizing conditions, known as such, liberation involves
challenging institutions, including philosophical institutions, or popular conceptual frameworks. But “una nueva cultura”, supporting more adequate concepts may not be fully defensible before we start to live it.

Marx knew this to be true. He did not provide a vision of the new communist society: such a vision only comes clearly into view as collaborative efforts are made to work toward it. Early Buddhist thinkers referred to *saddha*, or faith, as one of the central cognitive faculties. It has nothing to do with religion. *Saddha* is a feeling of enthusiasm that arises in the mind when we perform certain actions and experience the results for ourselves. Such faith, or motivation, comes not from belief but from action.\(^1\)

It means we sometimes have to live differently *first* to know why we should. Cubans have lived differently. Even US political conservatives know it. When Fidel Castro resigned in 2006, many predicted internal squabbling and chaos. Yet Julia Sweig, US Rockefeller senior fellow, noted a “stunning display of orderliness and seriousness”, indicating the Cuban Revolution “rests upon far more than the charisma, authority and legend of [Raul and Fidel Castro]” (Sweig 2007, cited in Veltmeyer & Rushton 2013: 301).

More significant in this regard, though, is Cuban foreign policy, particularly internationalism (e.g. Gleijeses 2002). Cuba sent 300,000 volunteers to Angola between 1975 and 1991 to defeat the racist South African army. In Pretoria, a “wall of names” commemorates those who died fighting apartheid. Many Cuban names are there. No other foreigners are named (Gleijeses 2013: 521). In 1991, Nelson Mandela asked, “What other country can point to a record of greater selflessness than Cuba has displayed in its relations to Africa?” (Gleijeses 2013: 526).

In 2014, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that “[f]ew have heeded the call [to fight Ebola], but one country has responded in strength: Cuba”. Cuba responded without hesitation, sending more than 450 doctors and nurses, chosen from more than 15,000 volunteers, by far the largest medical mission sent by any country. Why did 15,000 medical workers volunteer? There is an explanation. It has to do with the “far more” referred to by Sweig.

It is partly philosophical. A truth about motivation is known to economists (e.g. Pink 2010). We are not mostly motivated by material incentives but, instead, by what we receive back from an activity. Martí argued that “through the wonderful dispensation of nature, whoever gives of himself grows” (1894/1999: 46–7). At least 15,000 medical workers that year believed him. It would have been because they themselves experienced such “wonderful dispensation of nature”, personally.

Martí defended a view expressed elsewhere – e.g. Marx, the Buddha, some indigenous traditions – but not dominant in Europe: human beings are part of nature, and we depend upon nature, including other human beings. On such a view, there is no mystery that so many medical workers would risk their lives in West Africa: We live better, and freely, when others live better, and freely. It is not about morality but about the nature of reality. It’s about cause and effect.

In the 2000s, I introduced a philosophy course at my university, taught at the University of Havana by Cuban philosophers. I wanted students to know that *ideas* come from Cuba, not just culture. I wanted them to know the ideas were about *them*, about how to live and about the nature of reality. The course was quickly moved to Development Studies, which is a Social Sciences department. It was as if a course in Cuba could not be Philosophy. It had to be Geography or Sociology.

The course was renamed a course on culture. I had wanted it to be a philosophy course to counter a stereotype: ideas come from the North, culture from the South. When North Americans talk about freedom, we are talking about the human condition. When Latin Americans talk about freedom, it is about them, about “others”. It gets studied, if it does, as ethnography. In the more than twenty years I have been going regularly to Cuba, I can’t remember a single researcher in Cuba specifically to know its philosophical traditions. Their existence is not plausible.
Some suggest there are no alternatives to liberalism (Mills 2007: 102). There are plenty. But they are mostly from the South, and finding the evidence requires faith, of the sort that arises from action in a certain direction. The evidence is there, but commitment to philosophical liberalism makes it useless. It is explained away as “culture”. Epistemic injustice of this sort requires “una nueva cultura” challenging expectations not just about who exists as persons but about who can think and what they think about.

Epistemic injustice applies to Latin American independence movements at two levels. First, the independence movements of the nineteenth century and the Cuban revolution of the twentieth were about epistemic injustice, long before it was discussed in the US. They did not use the term, but they knew two facts: thinking depends upon universals, which are shared, and imperialism is dehumanizing. A revolution, involving and perhaps initiated by the Philosophical Polemic of 1838–40, was about what epistemic freedom really means.

Second, epistemic injustice explains why the significance of such struggles for political freedom, especially epistemic freedom, are ignored in the North. Martí scholar, Pedro Paulo Rodríguez, writes that even Latin Americans ignore the political relevance of their philosophical traditions (2012: 177). The reason may be implausibility, generated by the globalization of Northern philosophical views, particularly liberalism. It makes counter evidence as potentially destabilizing as the idea that aliens caused the lights to go off.

We gain in two ways by considering the two points noted above. I refer to the philosophy of science here because it is about the nature of knowledge and not about morality, at least not directly. In analytic philosophy, we separate (unfortunately) epistemology and metaphysics, and ethics and political philosophy. The fact/value distinction still motivates. It didn’t motivate Martí: that Latin Americans are persons is a matter of fact, directly relevant to what ought to be.

He gave priority to the nature of knowledge because before talking about ethics and politics, we must know people exist as persons and know that we know. We must know what it means, realistically. The Philosophical Polemic was about why it matters, politically, that we know how to know. Ignorance about knowledge, about universals, would undermine the struggle against imperialism, for political freedom. Indeed, they argued, such ignorance would end up justifying imperialism (Conde Rodríguez 2000).

On occasion, I meet North American researchers in Cuba. They say they are there to listen, to hear stories, any stories. They want to be non-judgmental. But when I ask whether they’ve collected stories of Communist Party members, they say no, not deliberately. They also admit to not seeking out members of the government. Their listening is judgmental, after all, unwittingly so. The moral judgment, defining direction, lies embedded in a worldview, unacknowledged, determining without argument who is free and who is unfree.

Such researchers may not know that social and natural sciences depend upon kinds. Such ignorance will mean their work is ultimately conservative, a vehicle for that very worldview. It was precisely this consequence that concerned the Polemicists. The first point above, regarding plausibility judgments, explains why they were correct. Self-conception, including national identity, is part of the “Background” (Searle 1995) explaining such judgments. It can include a view of both individual and political freedom, determining the results of research on such topics, before any empirical investigation.

Early Buddhist philosophers referred to sakkāyadīthi, or personality-belief. It includes national identity, opinions, loyalties, as well as petty likes and dislikes. Burmese monk, Ledi Sayadaw
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considered it a deep and pervasive evil (1999: 256–7), preventing freedom: We invest ourselves in personality belief, expecting it to ground human well-being, non-morally at least, and it cannot do so. For, it is largely arbitrary, explained by parents, teachers, social context and the media, among other factors.

Investment in sakkāyadiṭṭhi is explained by ignorance, particularly of cause and effect. The Buddha, like Martí, did not assume the fact/value distinction: precisely as I understand the nature of reality, constantly changing, I begin to understand myself and others. That sakkāyadiṭṭhi is arbitrary is a matter of fact. It should matter, and it did to Martí, that it not be a foundation for defining individual freedoms. For Martí, such freedoms involved a “Herculean struggle” against oneself (1882/2002a: 49). It was a striking view set against European liberalism.

But it was in synch with Eastern philosophers who acknowledged that human beings, like the rest of the universe, are subject to cause and effect, and dependent upon such for self-knowledge and freedom. If, like the oyster in its shell, we take personality-belief, including national identity, for granted, we don’t notice that it can be ultimately dehumanizing, because the world is that way. The risk was eminently clear to Varela and Luz, who were not politically radical. The risk is evident today, if we care to notice.

The second point above, regarding the epistemic significance of faith, or saddha, tells us what to do about the epistemic injustice perpetuated by sakkāyadiṭṭhi and inevitable attachment to it. Martí emphasized what García Marruz calls “double redemption”, as noted above, recognizing a naturalistic, causal conception of knowledge. The dialectical nature of knowledge, Martí argued, as did Marx, means how we think depends upon how we live.

J. M. Coetzee’s Disgrace describes a male dog beaten when, on sensing a bitch, he became excited and unmanageable (1999: 89–90). With “Pavlovian regularity, the owners would beat it”. The result was that the “poor dog didn’t know what to do . . . it would chase around the garden . . . whining, trying to hide”. Coetzee comments that a dog can be punished for wrongdoing – for chewing a shoe, for example – but not for going against its nature. The result is despair and confusion, a dog that punishes itself.

Human beings are punishing ourselves. Charles Taylor writes that we live in an “age of authenticity” in which happiness is having choices, the more the better (2007: 470–9). Scientifically, such a view cannot be right. Desires have causes, like everything else. They have no special status regarding human well-being unless of course we equate human well-being with doing what we want. Considered realistically, though, this makes well-being an enslavement to habit patterns.

That’s how Martí saw it. So did Eastern philosophers (Hart 1987). It shouldn’t be surprising, considering cause and effect, that on such a view of well-being, we experience despair and confusion, like the dog in Coetzee’s example. The greater risk, though, is that we don’t experience despair and confusion.

Eugène Ionesco had this worry. His 1959 play, Rhinoceros, is about a small town where people turn into rhinoceroses. At first, everyone is horrified by the rhinoceroses but eventually the change becomes seductive. Even the town’s logician becomes a rhinoceros, happily, wanting to “move with the times” (Ionesco 2000:102–3).

Ionesco’s play is about totalitarianism, but not the political sort. Instead, he meant totalitarianism of reason when no questions are raised about how human beings (and monsters) are individuated, the dilemma with which the play closes. In the end, Berenger, the only human remaining,
reminds himself that “[a] man’s not ugly to look at, not ugly at all!” However, a few sentences later he says, “I should have gone with them while there was still time” (Ionesco 2000: 104).

Berenger’s conviction wavers, and we wonder whether his self-understanding (that he is “not ugly at all”) will sustain his broader social understanding (that rhinoceritis is “ disgusting”). He might, after all, go with the rhinos without regret, suggesting that rhinoceritis is not as serious a problem as identifying it as a problem, once everyone is a monster. Rhinoceritis, like everything else, is about kinds.

Rhinoceritis was the concern of the early Cuban activists and later Martí. Political domination was one issue. Dehumanization was another. The tiger of imperialism, Martí wrote, crouches “behind every tree, in every corner . . . his claws unsheathed” (1891/2002c: 293). Neither Martí nor his predecessors thought the tiger was easily known, or even identified. Their preoccupation with the reality of the ideas was motivated by personal experience with rhinoceritis (1895/2002d: 343–4).

Ironically, when we consider the reality of ideas, as Martí did throughout his entire body of work, religious philosophical traditions are useful. A dialectical, causal account of knowledge challenges how we live, as Martí argued. It implies, for example, the epistemic significance of self-dispossession. It also implies the significance of silence, specifically mental silence, needed to receive back from the world. Both ideas are prevalent in religious traditions, and little discussed in analytic philosophy.

Indeed, Terry Eagleton urges progressive philosophers to consider religious traditions, since they no longer read Marx (2009: xii). One reason is that religious philosophers often express the more Marxist idea that “freedom thrives only within the context of a fundamental dependency” (Eagleton 2009: 16). We need to live such “fundamental dependency”, and some people do, within the North. North American activism has a history of looking South for inspiration and ideas (e.g. Gosse 1993). It just doesn’t extend to philosophy, at least not in Cuba, and certainly not regarding political freedom.

8

Political freedom, for Martí, Varela and Luz, motivated thorough-going rejection of philosophical liberalism. Those in the North, arriving belatedly to the question of epistemic injustice, might follow suit. Cuba’s battle for ideas, centuries old, was and is about the nature of ideas. It is consistent with some philosophical ideas in the North, mostly confined to the philosophy of science. The causal, naturalistic character of knowledge suggests epistemic freedom is undermined when injustice, even epistemic injustice, is named and analyzed without also transforming – politically, social and personally – conditions explaining it: capitalism and imperialism. This takes faith, “una nueva cultura”.

Related chapters 9, 13, 24, 37

Note

1 For those who think a cognitive faculty does not involve affect, or who are inclined to the Buddha’s writing (as opposed to the institutions that have emerged from them) as religion, see my Freedom and Death: Philosophical Reflections on Dhamma (Cause and Effect) (forthcoming).

References

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