

## LUIS VILLORO: KNOWLEDGE AND TRUTH

by Alfredo Lucero-Montaña

The aim of this work is to review how Luis Villoro (Barcelona: 1922, of Mexican parents) — a well-known philosopher in the Spanish-speaking world—, comes to grip with knowledge and truth in his book *Creer, saber, conocer* (1). One of the most important contributions of Villoro's work is his modification of the traditional analysis of "knowledge". Villoro states that the necessary and sufficient conditions of knowledge are:

S knows that  $p$  if and only if:

- 1) S believes that  $p$ , and
- 2) S has objectively sufficient grounds (2) in believing that  $p$  (3) [175].

Villoro claims that the notion of "knowledge" requires the notion of "objectively sufficient grounds" (objective justification), and at the same time, the notion of "objective justification" requires the notion of "truth" [181] (4). Villoro's interpretation of truth does not only include semantic, but metaphysical ideas on a *realistic* ground. Thus Villoro writes that in the analysis of:

" $p$ " is true if and only if  $p$

$p$  is "what makes true the proposition " $p$ ", and  $p$  could only be the *real fact*, just like it exists independently of a subject that believes that " $p$ " [176]. Villoro then admits the independent-existence of real facts, and the mind-independent nature of reality: "We must admit that if " $p$ " is true,  $p$  exists with independence of the subject" [178].

Villoro justifies his realism appealing to the argument of the best explanation:

the notions of "reality" and "truth" are necessary for *explaining* the objectivity of the justification... the objectivity presupposes the coincidence of statements within a community of epistemic subjects. With regard to the statements of facts (empirical statements), the best explanation for that coincidence is the real existence, mind-independent, of the facts judged. Otherwise the inter-subjectivity will only be on account of bizarre hypotheses... The acknowledgement of a real world, common to every subject, based on the verification of all empirical statements, is the only conclusive, complete and coherent explanation of our knowledge. *Truth, as reality-correspondence of our statements, is the only adequate rational explanation of the objective justification of our reasons* [181].

Villoro claims that the notion of truth and its correlative notion of reality are necessary

to understand the concept of objective justification. He understands objective justification as the coincidence of statements within an epistemic community; coincidence of the subjects' reliability of what is objective. Here *reliability* is understood in regard with the actual epistemic conditions (available knowledge, level of technology, basic beliefs and social relations) for such community. But the possibility of objective justification lies on the truth that is known. For Villoro, objective justification only means that the subjects of a community have *the best justification available* for believing that something is true (but it could be revealed false for the same subject at another time, for another subject of the same community or for an external observer). In this sense, objective justification is a warranty as reliability; warranty that depends on the justified beliefs of the involved subjects.

What is the fact that makes true a statement? Villoro writes:

We must accept that if “p” is true, *p* exist with independence of any subject. But what *exists* with independence of any subject cannot be known with the same independence. It is not contradictory that someone knows a fact that exists with independence of his knowledge, but it is contradictory that someone knows a real fact with independence of his knowledge. Hence, I cannot *know* that something is true with independence of my ways to grasp truth (...) Now, then, the reasons to know are all those that allows a subject to rely his judgment on reality... so that anyone knows, it is necessary that his reasons be enough to warrant the real existence of *p*; but then the statement about the truth of “p” depends on those same reasons [178-179].

If truth in the sense of correspondence to reality is true adequate explanation for the inter-subjective agreement which is required for objective justification, Does this seem to require that any objectively justified statement be true? Villoro replies:

The absolute truth is not completely achievable to historical subjects; their access to it will always be partial and limited by factual conditions. Nevertheless, the complete correspondence of our statements to reality is a normative ideal of reason... [88].

Therefore, the access to truth will always be historically conditioned, and the normative aim is to achieve progressive descriptions of the world —historically conditioned in all epistemic community, but every day better furnished of warrants to achieve the reality. Hence, these progressive approaches to reality will have a relative and progressive character.

In short, Villoro holds: 1) the independent-existence of the world, but not necessarily

the independence of the (mental) objects with respect to the mind; 2) that any subject can judge the true of his statements but with his own reasons; and 3) there is not a definite, complete and truthful description of the world.

In order to maintain his pretension, Villoro states three arguments to eliminate the truth condition for the analysis of “S knows that *p*”, that is, his view of knowledge as truth-free condition.

a) The first one states:

In the traditional definition of “knowledge,” the second condition (“*p* is true”) takes a different form than the other two. While the latter two mention the subject of knowledge, the second one does not. The definition is not precise while it does not mention *who* considers the truth of “*p*”. Must “*p* is true” be understood as asserted by S, or by any possible subject? [182].

Against the possible reply that the truth condition must be met because *p* is an independent condition of the other conditions (belief and justification), and it only holds concerning that the fact *p* --what S's belief refers to-- exists externally and independently of the subject, Villoro writes:

The second condition states the absolute truth of “*p*” as a two-fold relation between a sentence (or proposition) and a fact. Then one must presuppose that there is no-one to consider the existence of such relation. Indeed, in the moment we admit that someone considers it, he will judge it by his grounds (S in other moment or S<sup>n</sup>, an adequate epistemic subject, member of the same community of S, who judges it)... If we interpret the relation of truth as absolute, independently of the grounds considered by the subject, we cannot apply it to any subject's statement. Thus we would state in such a manner the second condition that, in principle, anyone can assert it, and therefore no-one can assert that S knows. Indeed, one can never *know* that a sentence is true, and hence that someone knows, but by the criterion of truth, that is, by grounds [183].

I think Villoro's statement is right. Nevertheless, Villoro does not consider a third possibility. When he writes about a subject, he refers to an adequate (pertinent) epistemic subject (5). I think this notion is relevant to the notion of objective justification, but it is very weak to determine the notion of truth. Of course S<sup>n</sup> (an adequate epistemic subject, member of the same community of S) is always the subject that examines the presupposed knowledge of S, but in addition of the two possibilities considered by Villoro --S in other moment or S<sup>n</sup>--, there is a third possibility: that S<sup>n</sup> might be an external observer of S's community. The fact is that S<sup>n</sup> will examine S's reasons in accordance with his own reasons --those relative to his society.

b) The second argument states:

If “S knows that  $p$ ” includes “ $p$  is true” and “true” is understood in the sense of absolute truth, then we would only know infallible propositions [184].

Villoro states a conjunctive proposition: that the notion of knowledge includes that “ $p$  is true” and “true” is understood in the sense of absolute truth as correspondence. In order to defeat the conclusion --that we only know infallible propositions--, Villoro rejects the truth condition in the notion of knowledge, that is, he excludes the sentence “ $p$  is true”.

But there is in Villoro's analysis a conceptual tension between the *definition* of knowledge and *the criteria to accept that is the case*. His argument implies the idea that the definition must meet *who* considers that  $p$  is true. But you can reply that this condition is only necessary to the *criterion* to decide that S knows  $p$ , and not for the definition of "knowledge". I believe that his arguments are consistent in regard with the *criterion* that is the case of knowledge, but not against the notion of truth.

Let us review this difficulty. Certainly, Villoro wants to apply the notion of "knowledge" to beliefs objectively justified, but fallible. A belief is objectively justified, if it includes objectively sufficient grounds for a subject:

that the object of his belief does not only have existence for him, but it has real existence too, independently of his own judgment. Therefore, objectively sufficient grounds are for a subject enough warranty that his belief is true, and he knows; hence they are criterion of truth... [179].

Because the objectively sufficient grounds are the criteria of truth for  $p$ , they warrant “for a subject, the real existence of  $p$ ” [*ibid.*].

According to Villoro the existence of  $p$  is not relative to S, but only to S's “warranties” in believing that  $p$ . Therefore, “knowledge” implies to have objectively adequate grounds in order to affirm that  $p$  is true, that is, that  $p$  is a fact that exists independently of any statement. But this issue you can only applied it to the subjects of the same epistemic community. After all, a subject of another community could admit that  $p$  is false and  $p$  does not exist. Villoro then states that our empirical knowledge is *fallible* in the sense of *correctable*:

the warranty of truth, for the empirical propositions, is relative to a time and historical society. The reasons that could be sufficient for an epistemic community *C1* at time *t1*, could be insufficient for another community *C2* at time *t2* [180] (6).

For Villoro, the warranties of truth are relative to *S*, not truth itself as correspondence. Villoro's analysis is compromised with the idea that knowledge is fallible. If we admit that knowledge is by definition objectively justified, it might be probably true, but not necessarily, hence it is fallible and correctable at a time. Because knowledge *refers* to reality --there is not an *absolute correspondence--*, it is *fallible*, and consequently *correctable*.

c) Finally, Villoro's third argument is based on Gettier's examples. His conclusion entails that those examples arise because:

[the] justification, insofar it is based on *different grounds* of those which warrant the truth of the belief. For *S* knowing that *p* is necessary that he knows it by the reasons that hold the truth of “*p*”, and not other reasons [190].

His strategy to meet those examples is obtained by simplifying the analysis, understanding the “justification” in a way that is not independent of the truth condition. But then we cannot understand it as justification only for the subject, but for everyone [191].

But justification, as we already noted, is not justification *for everyone*, but for an *adequate epistemic subject*. But Villoro denies the independence of the notion of truth as correspondence and the justification for believing as relative to the subject, and nevertheless fallible. Therefore in his definition of knowledge arises a tension between the notion of truth as correspondence — independent of the justification frameworks--, and a relative conception of knowledge justification.

Is one justification being a justification for everyone versus it being justification for an adequate epistemic subject? Is that one just for an adequate epistemic subject is a weaker condition, relative to a time and community, so this his justification does not require truth as correspondence?

For Villoro, there are two senses of warranty for truth: On the one hand, the warranty-1 is an objective justification for an adequate epistemic subject within a certain

community. Here objective justification relies on the beliefs of the subject for such community. On the other hand, warranty-2 relies on the truth-value of statements, that is, on the conceptual frameworks. In the first case, there is always the possibility that the justified beliefs may reveal false, and also the possibility that truth-value statements are not objectively justified --the key concept is reliability. In the second case, Villoro admits the possibility of any possible subject —external to the epistemic community—, that considers the same justified beliefs, and to whom the warranty are not those beliefs, but the truth-value propositions. Here the key idea of warranty for the different subjects --with different conceptual frameworks-- is that they have reality in common.

In sum, I think that Villoro's truth-free condition of the traditional analysis of “S knows that *p*” is correct. In this issue, Villoro states that knowledge as an objectively justified belief is not necessarily true belief, because objective justification concerns reliability of a belief for an adequate epistemic subject, while truth concerns reliability of a belief for a possible subject.

The correspondence theory of truth sustains that it is *rational* to demand a justification that our knowledge *corresponds* to reality. But the epistemic notion of truth --as stated by Villoro-- holds that is rational to demand an objective justification of our knowledge. The former offers a warranty of truth that responds to the question about the nature of knowledge. Here the case is that if any possible subject has a “truth-tie” to reality (whether he knows it or not), this “tie” is the warranty of his actions to succeed. The latter responds to a question about the adequate epistemic subject, that is, why he is reliable to succeed in his actions. The answer is because he is objectively justified. Here the criteria of truth are the warranties for knowledge, and they are relative to a community —in a particular time and historical society. From this perspective knowledge *is fallible*, and hence *correctable*, but not false.

In other words, we can save Villoro's tension between the notion of truth as correspondence and knowledge as objective justification, concluding that from an ontological point of view the notion of truth is prior to the objective justification, because objective justification is the case if there is truth; but from a cognitive point view the notion of objective justification is prior to truth, because we only *know* something that is true if it is objectively justified. In other words, Villoro

meets this tension admitting the ontological independence of reality, and its cognitive dependence.

### Footnotes

1. Luis Villoro, *Creer, saber, conocer* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1982).
2. “Objectively sufficient grounds” are the adequate reasons that warrant the truth of the belief, independent of the subject's judgment; reasons that are determined by the object, or the objective situation, of the belief and not by subjective justification; and they must be conclusive, complete and coherent to any adequate epistemic subject that considers them [137-138].
3. References in brackets indicate the page number.
4. Here Villoro has in mind Tarski's primitive notion of truth.
5. Villoro seems to be compromised with a naturalized epistemology. But at the end of his book (ch. 12) he admits that a theory of knowledge could be related to contexts of liberation, e.g., as demystification and destabilization of hegemonic ideologies and in this sense could affect social reality, hence it is legitimate to consider a theory of knowledge as objective.
6. According to Villoro an “adequate epistemic subject” of S's belief that “p” is a subject that has accessibility (availability) to the same reasons (grounds) of S, and not others, and an “adequate epistemic community” is the group of adequate epistemic subjects in believing that *p* (*supra*, ch. 7).

**Alfredo Lucero-Montaña** (Tijuana, México) holds a master's degree in philosophy from San Diego State University (San Diego) and a bachelors in philosophy from Universidad Iberoamericana (México City).