

Article

# A Quandary of Wokeness

M. Oreste Fiocco

Department of Philosophy, University of California, Irvine, CA, USA; mfiocco@uci.edu

Submitted: 16 June 2021, accepted: 31 January 2022, published: 29 April 2022

**Abstract:** Being woke, that is, being aware of the appalling injustices borne by many in American society because of certain identities or features and wanting to act to redress these injustices, seems to put one in a quandary: either one can accept a role in the struggle against injustice that seems obviously inefficacious or, if one insists on doing more, one must, it seems, engage in epistemic imperialism, thereby wronging some of those one is endeavoring to help.

**Keywords:** sexual orientation; race; gender; identity; wokeness; epistemic imperialism

**How to cite:** Fiocco, M.O. A Quandary of Wokeness. *Journal of Controversial Ideas* 2022, 2(1), 10; doi:[10.35995/jci02010010](https://doi.org/10.35995/jci02010010).

© 2022 Copyright by the author. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) license.



I am a straight, white, cis man and I am woke. I characterize myself in these terms sincerely, without the least resentment or irony. In characterizing myself as *woke*, I mean that I am aware of the appalling injustices borne by people in American society because of their sexual orientation, race, gender, and other features. This awareness comes through observation, and the effort to empathize with people whose experiences it is impossible for me actually to share. It incites me to want to try to redress these injustices. Surely, there is much I can do, given that I am privileged in several dimensions, secure both in my position and financially, and have the conviction that action must be taken.

If you want to undo injustice, you can find, through conversation and various media, lists of suggested actions to take. Some of these are not really helpful: *Donate! Volunteer!* (Yes, but to whom, with whom? Organizations are based on different principles, with competing priorities and objectives. On what grounds do you choose?) Some suggestions are more helpful: *Call out bigotry! Intervene!* I am willing to do both. Acting on these suggestions, however, depends on happenstance and, at best, addresses only a few instances of recurrent problems.

Most lists of suggested actions include the exhortation to *educate oneself*. If you do this, you will acquire a sense of the complexity of the problems of injustice, whose bases are not merely in the overt actions of individuals, but in an insidious system. This system, in a society ostensibly founded on equality and embracing equal opportunity: incarcerates blacks at over 5 times the rate of non-Hispanic whites—so although blacks

make up only 13% of the total population, they are 40% of those incarcerated;<sup>1</sup> allows a woman to make, on average, 78¢ for every dollar a man does;<sup>2</sup> leads to only 22% of Latinx adults having some sort of college degree—whereas 47% of adult whites do (thus, as of 2017, degree attainment levels of Latinx adults were about 10% lower than the attainment levels of whites in 1990).<sup>3</sup> This system, working via mechanisms overlooked or ignored, can oppress even against the intentions of those who would succor. If you want to make momentous changes, ones more widespread and lasting than real but ephemeral ones in your immediate environment, you must smash the system.

But here it is by no means clear how to proceed. The injurious system is manifest, the means of undoing it are elusive. If you are appropriately woke and educated, you will be conscious of discordant voices—including ones from those most harmed by the system—on the point of what needs to be done. There is disagreement about how the system works, on how much of it should be dismantled, on how to go about dismantling it, on what should replace it and even on how to understand those bearing its negative effects. Awareness of this variety of inconsistent opinions leads to irresolution that inhibits engagement. This is my current state.

I have been bothered by this irresolution. Recently, I began to recognize its source in these conversations of discordant voices. A scene in Regina King's film, *One Night in Miami*, was revelatory. King's film is a fictional account of the night Muhammad Ali (Cassius Clay at the time) upset Sonny Liston to first become heavyweight champion of the world. In the scene I found so illuminating, Malcolm X is portrayed as castigating Sam Cooke for not doing enough in the struggle for racial justice. Cooke is fiercely indignant at the accusation that he is not contributing appropriately to the struggle and the two men argue. This film, of course, is not a documentary, so this argument might not have occurred. Yet you can easily believe it did, and that other similar ones, between those who live *and might die* by the struggle, take place every day.

Any familiarity with discussions of race in America reveals a host of contrary judgments and directives. Therefore, for you to act without arbitrariness—in good faith and with commitment—to assist in redressing the problems of racial injustice seems to require evaluation of these incompatible views, in order to accept some and thereby reject others. Such evaluation seems to require, at the very least, clear accounts of the central concepts and distinctions—for example, *blackness*, *Latinx*, *Asian*, *Asian-American*, *person of color*, etc.—and some account of what is to be done in light of these. But I have no such accounts. More importantly, given the incompatibility of the views, I am not in the position to obtain these accounts without disregarding or overruling the views of some I aim to help, and such dismissal, an assertion of dominance, seems to be something like epistemic imperialism. Even if I am able—which is contentious—to say, for instance, what blackness is, who am I to say what is to be done in the best interests of those who are black, when doing so requires me to disregard some of those who identify as black?

My irresolution is not limited to the domain of racial injustice. I have a very good friend, Kathleen Stock, who is vilified as a TERF (that is, a trans-exclusionary radical feminist). I understand her positions—for which she has been persecuted—and the conscientiousness and compassion that motivates them. Yet I have other very good

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/rates.html>.

<sup>2</sup> [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f8/Equal\\_Pay\\_Infographic.pdf](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f8/Equal_Pay_Infographic.pdf). (Source: Women's Bureau, U.S. Department of Labor).

<sup>3</sup> [https://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Latino-Degree-Attainment\\_FINAL\\_4-1.pdf](https://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Latino-Degree-Attainment_FINAL_4-1.pdf).

friends who challenge the former, firmly rejecting her views. I also understand their positions, and appreciate the care and values underlying them. The positions here are irreconcilable, and so the actions each side prescribes to mitigate the unacceptable injustices associated with gender are simply incompatible. Given my awareness of this, principled action seems to require clear accounts of the central concepts (e.g., *woman*, *transgender*, *nonbinary*, etc.). But, again, I am not in the position to acquire these without a seeming epistemic imperialism. Even if I am able—which is contentious—to say, for instance, what it is to be a woman, who am I to say what is to be done in the best interests of women, when doing so requires me to disregard some of those who identify as women?

The difficulties here are deeper than familiar ones of acting with imperfect knowledge or in light of your own competing values. Each of us must always act without complete knowledge of all factors germane to that action, as we balance values that might motivate incompatible actions. For limited beings, such agency cannot be faulted. Here, however, there is this problem, which seems unavoidable, of *epistemic imperialism*. To be an epistemic imperialist is to employ concepts or other theoretical apparatus recognized to be incompatible with some person's concepts (or other theoretical apparatus) in order to address issues of mutual importance, in particular, when devising courses of action that bear on that person. To act with respect to someone in light of an account of things—including, perhaps, themselves—that one recognizes they do not accept, is to belittle that person by dismissing their own understanding of things; in so doing, one acts as if the other is not a significant epistemic agent and, hence, what they might value or how they might structure their lives is irrelevant. Such canceling, via this sort of epistemic dominance, is a harm. Thus, if you assert that pork is edible by (openly) serving bacon to someone known to maintain a kosher diet or to be vegan, you disregard, in an inappropriate way, how that person sees things and, by so doing, disregard that person themselves (presenting your own reasons for eating pork while serving it does not alleviate the harm).

Not every disagreement leads to epistemic imperialism. There can and must be civil exchanges in which opposing views are presented, compared, and the reasons for holding one of the views examined. Epistemic imperialism occurs after—or in lieu of—such an exchange of reasons, when disagreement remains and, insisting on one's own view, one acts to, say, get someone off a university campus or out of a certain restroom. Moreover, one is not an epistemic imperialist merely by adopting (and acting on) a view of some phenomenon about which one does not have first-hand experience and, hence, which others might, in some sense, know better. In most cases, the pertinent features of that phenomenon are sufficiently accessible that one can form justified beliefs about it, and act justifiably with respect to it, even without such intimate experience. So, for instance, I may have justified beliefs about abortion, and act in light of these, without ever having been pregnant.

In cases of addressing injustice to certain groups or kinds, however, many people hold that the matter is different. In these cases, some believe that distinctive mental experiences available only to those who are members of that group (or instances of that kind) are *constitutive* of that group. Thus, what it is to be a member of that group is to have those very experiences. These constitutive experiences then inform the interests and needs of members of that group, thereby determining how they ought to be treated. Of course, this account of group membership is disputed by many, including those who self-identify as members of the relevant group. A different account of who is in a group has consequences for the interests and needs of that group, and so determines a different course with respect to how they ought to be treated. Crucially, even where there is not

this sort of dispute regarding who is in a group, there are always disagreements among members of a group about what actions ought to be taken to best promote their interests. I (indeed anyone) must adopt *some* account of group membership or course of action; presumably, ones that best align with my own epistemic principles and values. In doing so, I overrule the views—and consequently debase the values of—at least some members of the group I am endeavoring to help. This is epistemic imperialism. Given the divisions among members of any group, such imperialism is unavoidable, insofar as I would try to elevate a group that is being treated unjustly.

So maybe, in light of all this, my role as a straight, white, cis man is not to instigate change. If principled action requires epistemic imperialism, then maybe my role is merely to appreciate alternative perspectives. This, though, would leave out powerful allies in the effort to eradicate injustice. Perhaps I should act only against those things that anyone, regardless of their more sophisticated views of race or gender, would regard as objectionable. I can do this, but it is a course that is extremely limited. It does seem that my role in this effort should not be simply passive or piecemeal. If, as seems the case, straight white cis men are the hegemonic group in America and the primary beneficiaries of the current system, then those among us who find this system unconscionable must have more to do to bring it down.

This leads to a quandary: One in my position can accept a peripheral role in the struggle against injustice, one that seems obviously inefficacious. Or, if one insists on doing more, one must, it seems, engage to some extent in epistemic imperialism, canceling, and thereby wronging, some of those one is endeavoring to help. Neither course is consistent with being woke, that is, with the awareness of both the magnitude of the problems of injustice—and the essential role of all those who have endured injustice in determining how best to address these problems.

Some might think the solution here is obvious. The bases of injustice in our society, they hold, are not the divisions between races and genders and other identities, but rather the material conditions arising from the disparities between the haves and the have nots. To redress injustice, you must eliminate the riling disparities; any action intended to address societal injustice not directed at these is misguided. I wholeheartedly accept the former claim, not the latter. Races, genders, orientations, and other means by which persons identify themselves are real and, therefore, fundamental<sup>4</sup> parts of the world—no less real than cell phones, baseball, or money (which are no less real than trees, photosynthesis, or hydrogen atoms). As such, they can be, and do seem to be, sources of irreducible problems that require consideration and response. To dismiss these identities or the distinctions on which they are based, then, is not an adequate reaction to the quandary.

I present this quandary not because I think it justifies some agenda. On the contrary, the main concern here is that I lack an agenda when one for those like me is urgently needed. I could participate in a march with other supporters of the Black Lives Matter movement (which I have); attend courses designed to make me more aware of the pervasiveness of injustice in our society (which I have), I could take a pledge, promoted by my employer, to uphold certain values of equality and eschew practices contrary to them (which I have). I could make every effort—which I do—to teach my children to judge people only by the content of their character, for our destiny is indeed tied up with all those

---

<sup>4</sup> See my “Each Thing Is Fundamental: Against Hylomorphism and Hierarchical Structure,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 56 (2019): 289–301.

who are mistreated; our freedom is indeed inextricably bound to theirs.<sup>5</sup> These actions, though, seem feeble. I am strong; certainly there is more that I can do. But what? I earnestly seek advice.

Note, however, before you offer advice: although the foregoing considerations put me in a quandary, they very likely put you in one, too.

**Acknowledgments:** I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the following people for very helpful discussion during the writing and revising of this paper: Sven Bernecker, Bill Brewer, Ian Coller, Jeff Helmreich, Dan Korman, Ari Koslow, Jeff McMahan, David Malament, J.B. Manchak, Duncan Pritchard, Kate Ritchie, Maya Rupert, Nathan Salmon, Matt Soteriou, Kathleen Stock, Elanor Taylor, and Tiffany Willoughby-Herard. One should not infer that those acknowledged agree with everything—or anything—that I say herein.

---

<sup>5</sup> This is, of course, an allusion to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech.