

Susan Haack

The whole truth and nothing but the truth

Filozofia Nauki 19/4, 7-23

2011

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Susan Haack

The Whole Truth and Nothing but the Truth*

Much truth is spoken, that more may be concealed. — Mr. Justice Darling (1879).¹

The word “truth” is sometimes used as an abstract noun: so used, it refers to the concept of truth or, as some might prefer to say, to the property of being true, or to the meaning of the word “true” and its synonyms in other languages. It is also sometimes used to refer to the things that fall in the extension of this concept; i.e., to true propositions, beliefs, statements, theories, etc.² In English we have just the one word, “truth,” to do both jobs; the distinction would be more obvious if we also had, say, “true-ness” for the first use. But the difference between the two uses is marked grammatically: in the second use, but not the first, “truth” takes the indefinite article (as in the opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice*: “it is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife”),³ and the plural form (when we speak of “the truths of arithmetic,” for example, or in the second sentence of the American Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal ...”) “Falsehood” works similarly, serving both as an abstract noun referring to the concept or the property of falseness and as a common noun referring to false propositions, etc.; and,

* © 2008 Susan Haack. All rights reserved. First published in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, XXXIII, 2008: 20-35.

¹ Charles J. Darling, *Scintillae Juris* (London: Davis and Son, 3rd, enlarged edition, 1879), p.73.

² There is a similar doubleness in the word “law”: compare “law is the will of the sovereign” and “Michigan law regarding the admissibility of expert testimony was revised in 2004.” (See n.18 below.)

³ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) in *The Works of Jane Austen* (London: Spring Books, 1966), p.171.

like “truth,” in the latter use it takes the plural form and, more rarely, the indefinite article. “Falsity,” however, seems to function, with rare exceptions, as an abstract noun.

This dual role of the word “truth” can give rise to trouble. Some, confusing the two uses, treat “truth,” the abstract noun, as if it referred to some very special, all-important true proposition; and so speak reverently of the Truth, with a capital “T,” as in “the Truth shall set you free.” Others, finding this kind of reverence for “the Truth” disturbing, confusedly arrive at the mistaken conclusion that it is mere superstition to place any value on truth, or even that we should repudiate talk of truth altogether. Patricia Churchland, for example, writes that “the truth, whatever that is, definitely takes the hindmost”;⁴ Sandra Harding that “the truth — whatever that is! — will not set you free”;⁵ Jane Heal, that “[t]ruth is generally thought to be a Good Thing,” but this “seeming truism” is misconceived, for truth isn’t really an evaluative term at all;⁶ Stephen Stich, that “once we have a clear view of the matter, most of us will not find any value . . . in having true beliefs”;⁷ and Richard Rorty, that he “does not have much use for notions like ‘objective truth.’”⁸

I have tackled both these kinds of confusion elsewhere;⁹ here, I want to focus on yet a third kind of confusion, also encouraged by the dual use of “truth”: attributing to truth, true-ness, what are really properties of some, but not all, truths.¹⁰ There is one truth, one true-ness or truth-concept. But there are many truths, i.e., many and various true propositions, etc.. Truth is not dependent on what we believe or accept; it is not relative to culture, community, theory, or individual; and it is not a matter of degree, nor is it a conglomeration of properties that might be satisfied in full or only

⁴ Patricia Smith Churchland, “Epistemology in the Age of Neuroscience,” *Journal of Philosophy*, 75.10, 1987: 544-53, p.549.

⁵ Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), p.xi.

⁶ Jane Heal, “The Disinterested Search for Truth,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 88, 1987-88: 97-108, p.97.

⁷ Stephen P. Stich, *The Fragmentation of Reason: Preface to a Pragmatic Theory of Cognitive Evaluation* (Cambridge, MA: Bradford Books, MIT Press, 1990), p.101.

⁸ Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p.86.

⁹ See Susan Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry: Towards Reconstruction in Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993); 2nd ed. under the title *Evidence and Inquiry: A Pragmatist Reconstruction of Epistemology* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2009), chapters 8 and 9; “Confessions of an Old-Fashioned Prig,” in Haack, *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate: Unfashionable Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 7-30; “Staying for an Answer: The Untidy Process of Groping for Truth,” *Times Literary Supplement*, July 9th, 1999: 12-14, reprinted in Haack, *Putting Philosophy to Work: Inquiry and Its Place in Culture* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2008), 25-36; “Engaging With the Engaged Inquirer: Response to Mark Migotti,” in Cornelis de Waal, ed., *Susan Haack: A Lady of Distinctions* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007), 277-80.

¹⁰ This diagnosis was already implicit in an earlier paper of mine, “The Unity of Truth and the Plurality of Truths,” *Principia* 9.1-2, 2005: 87-110; reprinted in Haack, *Putting Philosophy to Work* (n.9), 43-60. Correspondence with Steven Pethick helped me make it explicit.

in part. But some truths are made true by things we do, and others by what we believe; and some truths make sense only relativized to a time, a place, or a culture. Moreover, some true propositions are in some degree vague, others more precise; and some are in one way or another partial, others more complete. Truth, in short, is simple; but truths are not. Truths come in all shapes and sizes; and much of the time we traffic in the almost, the approximately, or the partially true.

The goal of the first section of this paper is to articulate these contrasts more carefully; the goal of the second, to explore some epistemological, rhetorical, and practical dimensions of partial truth.

1. THE TROUBLE WITH “TRUTH” AND “TRUTHS”

I note for the record that “true” is used in English as a predicate not only of beliefs, theories, claims, statements, propositions, and so on, but also of persons, pictures, and so forth, which are not propositional. We speak of a “true friend,” a “true likeness,” a “true scholar,” “true love”; we describe the whale as “a true mammal” and not “a true fish”; a memorable movie title speaks of “True Grit.” These non-propositional uses are quite closely related to the propositional ones, conveying something like “real, genuine, truly (an) F”: truly a friend, truly a likeness, truly a mammal, truly a scholar, truly determined, etc. In other uses, “true” is not quite so easily assimilable to the truth of propositions: for example, when we speak of “being true to oneself,” meaning something like “acting in accordance with one’s real character and values,” or when we describe a joint or beam as being “out of true,” meaning that it is crooked, slanted, askew. But in what follows I confine myself to “true” as it applies to propositions, statements, beliefs, and such.

I take for granted that truth, true-ness, is not to be identified with acceptance-as-true; for what is accepted as true may not be true, and what is true may not be accepted as such. Nor is truth to be identified with belief, or even with warranted belief; for what is believed, even what is believed on good evidence, may not be true, and what is true may not be believed. Nor is truth to be identified with knowledge; for while what is known must be true, what is true may not be known. Nor is truth to be identified with agreement; for while, if we agree that p, we agree that p is true, we may agree that p when p is not true, and we may not agree that p when p is true. And neither is truth to be identified with sincerity, truthfulness, or candor; for while a sincere, truthful person is disposed to speak the truth as he believes it to be, if his belief is mistaken his sincere assertion will be false.

I also take for granted that the most plausible of the umpteen competing philosophical theories of truth are, in intent or in effect, generalizations of the Aristotelian insight that “to say of what is not that it is not, or of what is that it is, is true.”¹¹ Some

¹¹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. W. D. Ross, Book Gamma (IV), 7, 1011b25, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), p.749.

of these, the many variants of the correspondence theory, turn those emphatic adverbs for which we reach when we say that *p* is true just in case *really, in fact*, *p*, into serious metaphysics, by construing truth as a relation, structural or conventional, of propositions or statements to facts or reality. Others, such as Alfred Tarski's semantic theory, Frank Ramsey's laconicist theory, and the many and various contemporary deflationist, minimalist, disquotationalist, prosententialist, etc., theories that are their descendants, don't require such large ontological investments. But Tarski himself doubted that his theory could be applied beyond the realm of regimented, formalized logical and mathematical languages; "*the very possibility of a consistent use of the expression 'true sentence' which is in harmony with the laws of logic and the spirit of everyday language,*" he writes, "*seems to be very questionable.*"¹² And now that the dust has settled from the Davidson program,¹³ we can see that Tarski's reservations were prescient. The most promising approach seems to be something along the lines of Ramsey's simple statement that "a belief that *p* ... is true if and only if *p*; for instance, a belief that Smith is either a liar or a fool is true is Smith is either a liar or a fool and not otherwise."¹⁴

Though it was long known as the "redundancy theory" of truth, Ramsey's account, laconic as it is, does not imply that "true" has no genuine role to play; Ramsey was well aware that, while "it is true that" is eliminable from direct truth-attributions (as when we say that it is true that Caesar crossed the Rubicon), it plays a substantial role in indirect truth-attributions (as when we say that Plato said some true things, and some false). Ramsey was also well aware that his account leaves many questions still to be answered — technical questions about the sentential quantifiers that will be needed to explain those indirect truth-attributions, and philosophical questions about representation (what it is for this to be the proposition that *p*) and reality (what it is for it to be the case that *p*). And he does not pretend to offer a criterion of truth, but acknowledges that his account leaves epistemological issues untouched.

But Ramsey's simple initial formulation will suffice for my articulation of what I mean by claiming:

- that though there are many and various true propositions, there is only one truth;
- that though some true propositions are about things of our making, truth is objective;

¹² Alfred Tarski, "The Concept of Truth in Formalized Languages" (first published in Polish in 1933), in Alfred Tarski, *Logic, Semantics, Metamathematics*, trans. J. H. Woodger (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), 152-278, p.165.

¹³ In "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," in Ernest Lepore, ed., *Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 433-46, Davidson himself effectively acknowledged that his project of giving a Tarskian theory of meaning for natural languages had been misconceived, writing (pp.445-6) that he had reached the conclusion that "there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers have supposed."

¹⁴ F. P. Ramsey, *On Truth* (papers from 1927-9), eds. Nicholas Rescher and Ulrich Majer (Dordrecht, the Netherlands: Kluwer, 1992), p.12.

- that though some true propositions make sense only understood as relative to place, time, culture, legal system, etc., truth is not relative;
- that though some true propositions are vague, truth is not a matter of degree; and:
- that though some propositions are only partly true, truth does not decompose into parts.

The core principle, that a proposition is true just in case it is the proposition that p , and p , applies whatever kind of truth-capable proposition we are dealing with: whether it be a mathematical theorem or a historical conjecture, a prophecy of imminent disaster or a meteorological prediction, a proposition about literature or a proposition about law, a theory in physics or a sociological generalization, a statement about what I had for breakfast on September 11th, 2001, or a prediction of who will win the next Presidential election, or (assuming that propositions of ethics are truth-capable) a proposition about what actions, motives, traits of character, persons, rules, institutional arrangements, etc., are morally desirable and what undesirable.¹⁵ This, at its simplest, is what I mean by saying that, though there are many truths, many theories of truth, and many conceptions, and misconceptions, of truth, there is just one truth: that *what it is for a claim to be true is the same, regardless of what the claim is about.*

The same simple formula, that a proposition is true just in case it is the proposition that p , and p , is enough to tell us that whether a proposition is true or is false is normally an objective matter; i.e., that it is neither necessary nor sufficient for a proposition's being true that you, or I, or anyone, believes it. This is obvious enough where claims and theories about natural phenomena and events, which are not of our making, are concerned. But it is no less true with respect to propositions about phenomena and events that occur only under artificial circumstances created in the laboratory, even though these are of our making; for whether such a claim is true or is false is still independent of whether you, or I, or anyone, believes that it is true or believes that it is false. Nor is it any less true with respect to legal truths, even though these are made true by legislation or precedent, i.e., by things people do; or with respect to social-scientific claims and theories, even though these are about social phenomena and institutions, which are constituted in part by people's beliefs, hopes, fears, etc. Consider, for example, the proposition that, as George Orwell puts it "the English working class ... are 'branded on the tongue,'" ¹⁶ i.e., that in England class status is closely correlated with accent. Whether this is true or is false does

¹⁵ And similarly, *mutatis mutandis*, for propositions of aesthetics (and for any other class of proposition where it is a matter of dispute whether they are truth-capable).

¹⁶ Orwell wrote that "[t]he English working class, as Mr. Wyndham Lewis has put it, are 'branded on the tongue.'" *In Front of Your Nose: The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters of George Orwell*, eds. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968), vol. IV, p.5. He is referring to Wyndham Lewis, *The Vulgar Streak* (1941; Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1985), p.38, where Martin speaks of "the superstition of *class* like a great halter around one's neck — in which my very tongue was branded."

have something to do with whether enough people in England believe it; nevertheless, its truth-value is still independent of whether you, or I, or any individual believes that it is true or believes that it is false.

Some propositions are incomplete, and hence incapable of truth or falsity, unless understood as restricted to a place, a time, or a culture. (Some might prefer to construe such supposed propositions as really only propositional functions, needing completion before they make it to the status of proposition.) A proposition to the effect that the law is thus-and-so, for example, makes sense only construed as relative to a legal system and to a time. It was once, but is no longer, true of English law that the penalty for stealing a sheep is death;¹⁷ it has been true of Florida law since 1952, and was true of Michigan law between 1956 and 2004 (when Michigan law was changed) that the admissibility of novel scientific testimony is subject to the *Frye* Rule.¹⁸ And many social-scientific claims, similarly, have to be understood as relativized to a place and a time. To judge by the speech of news announcers and actors in the recent British television programs I see in the U.S., though it was true of England at the time I grew up that class was closely associated with accent, this is true no longer. And so on. But whether it is true or it is false that in English law in 1831 the penalty for stealing a sheep was death, or whether it is true or it is false that in England in 2008 class and accent are closely correlated, is not relative to time or place. That some truths are relative to place, time, culture, legal system, etc., does not entail that what it is to be true is similarly relative.

Some truths are vague, in various ways and in varying degrees. “In varying degrees” is meant to indicate that it is less a matter of some truths being vague and others precise than of some being vaguer and others more precise: “he is tall” is vaguer than “he is significantly taller than the average Japanese male,” for example, but this in turn is vaguer than “He is six-foot-six.” To convey the real complexities, however, would require more than this simple kind of example — for what we call a language is really a great cluster of related idiolects, a vast, dense mesh of similar-enough but not quite identical patterns of usage. And any natural language is constantly shifting

¹⁷ The law providing that a person convicted of stealing a sheep should be sentenced to death, was passed “in the Seventh and Eighth Years of the Reign of King *George* the Fourth.” (This, of course, was the legal reality behind the saying, “might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb.”) The law was repealed in 1832. Statutes of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, 2 & 3 William IV, 1832, CAP. LXIII, s. I (11th July 1832).

¹⁸ According to the *Frye* Rule (dating from *Frye v. United States*, 54 App.D.C. 46, 293 F. 1013 (1923)), novel scientific testimony is admissible only if the principle on which it is based is “sufficiently established to be generally accepted in the field to which it belongs.” Florida adopted this rule in *Kaminski v. State*, 63 So.3d 339 (1952), and continues to accept it today; Michigan adopted this rule in *People v. Davis*, 34 Mich.348 (1956); but dropped it in 2004, when new Michigan Rules of Evidence adopted the *Daubert* standard (derived from *Daubert v. Merrell Dow Pharmaceuticals, Inc.*, 509 U.S. 579, 113 S.Ct. 2786 (1993)), according to which expert testimony, scientific or otherwise, is admissible only if it is both relevant and reliable.

and changing a little here and there. Some words and phrases are regimented, become less vague, when they are adopted as specialized tools in this or that field, and others lose specificity of meaning, become vaguer, when they gain currency in popular speech or in the jargon of advertisers, etc.¹⁹

“In various ways” is meant to indicate that there are many sources of vagueness. Enthusiasts of fuzzy logic, and not a few philosophers, have been preoccupied with the vagueness that arises with predicates like “tall,” “high,” “bald,” “loud,” “reliable,” etc., that express properties that come in degrees. But other parts of speech besides predicates can be gradational: nouns like “heap,” “crowd,” or “bunch,” for example, or adverbs like “quickly,” “fairly,” “reasonably,” or “normally.” There are also vague quantifying phrases, like “a few,” or “many” — a list to which C. S. Peirce would have added the existential quantifier, “some”²⁰ (which reminds me to mention that Bertrand Russell at one time described indefinite descriptions, such as “a man” in “I met a man” or “I saw a unicorn,” as ambiguous).²¹ And there are other kinds of indeterminacy of meaning besides the gradational. Familiar conversation-fillers like “nice” or “fine,” as well as more ephemeral buzz-words like “hinky” or “funky” — which according to Jacques Barzun, “as defined by an expert, means ‘very good or beautiful; solid; cheap; smelly; or, generally, no good’” — owe their usefulness in part precisely to their etiolated meanings, their lack of any very specific sense; they depend, as Barzun observes, on “tone, glance, or eyebrow.”²² And then there are what Barzun calls “foam-rubber public-relations words,”²³ which owe their usefulness in part to the fact that, while they retain their favorable connotations, their meanings have been stripped almost bare. Such foam-rubber PR jargon is by now ubiquitous not only in political speech (“progressive,” “change,” “democratic”), in advertising (“new,” “improved,” “scientific”), and in the jargon of real-estate salesmen (“gourmet kitchen,” “great room”), but also, as boosterism has become the order

¹⁹ See Susan Haack, “The growth of meaning and the limits of formalism: in science, in law,” *Análisis filosófico*, XXIX.1, 2009: 5-29.

²⁰ C. S. Peirce, *Collected Papers*, eds. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss, and (vols. 7 and 8), Arthur Burks (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931-58), 5.446, 1905. (References to the *Collected Papers* are by volume and paragraph number.)

²¹ Bertrand Russell, *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1919), chapter XVI.

²² Jacques Barzun, “What Are Mistakes and Why,” in Barzun, *A Word or Two Before You Go* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1986), 3-9, p.8. Compare these uses of “funky,” which I happened upon while I was writing this paper: “Chris’s cabin was funky and charming” (James Patterson, *Ist to Die* (New York: Warner Books, 2001), p.370); “... a fashion craze that came and went quickly in the funky 1960s and 1970s, when people who should have known better snapped up clothing in loud, psychedelic colors” (Rachel Dodes and Christina Passariello, “Gasp! Polyester is the New Name in Paris Fashion,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 1, 2008, A.1.)

²³ Jacques Barzun, *A Stroll With William James* (1983) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p.223.

of the day there too, in the academy as well (“prestigious,” “excellence,” “distinguished,” “research-active,” “collegial”).²⁴

It might seem that ambiguity is a matter of an expression’s having too many meanings, and is thus the very opposite of vagueness, which is a matter of an expression’s having too little meaning; but when terms with several or many meanings are used with no discrimination of sense, the effect is often hard to distinguish from vagueness. Technical terms in philosophy often suffer this fate: “realism,”²⁵ for example, “naturalism,”²⁶ “social epistemology,” “virtue epistemology,”²⁷ and no doubt many others. There is also a peculiar kind of vagueness that might equally be described as “pseudo-precision,” where key terms of no very determinate meaning are dressed up in mathematical or logical formalism to convey the illusion of rigor — a kind of vagueness notoriously common in the social sciences, but no less ubiquitous, it seems to me, in neo-analytic philosophy.

Vagueness is usually contrasted with precision; and precision, like vagueness, is subtler than is sometimes supposed. We think first, perhaps, of the measurable, quantifiable, syntactically expressible regimentation rightly valued by mathematicians, scientists, and logicians, where gradational terms are replaced by precisely defined substitutes. But we should not forget another kind of exactness rightly valued not only by poets, playwrights, and novelists, not only by wits and devotees of the *mot juste*, but by everyone who respects effective prose. As Orwell reminds us in “Politics and the English Language,” “[w]hat above all is needed” for good writing “is to let the meaning choose the words, and not the other way around”:²⁸ this is the kind of “poetic” exactness achieved by choosing the less familiar and more discriminating word or phrase over the lazily comfortable and commonplace, or by coming up with a fresh metaphor or simile rather than relying on the stale and clichéd.

It is sometimes thought that vagueness is an obstacle to truth; on the contrary, however, it is actually easier to say something true if you aren’t too precise: compare “he’s quite tall” with “he’s six foot two-and-fifteen-sixteenths in his thickest socks,” or “New York has a large population” with “the State of New York has a population of n adults and m children under 18.” To describe a statement as “accurate,” I take it, is to say that it is precise as well as true. (This may explain why we may describe a statement as “precisely” or “exactly,” but not as “accurately,” wrong.)

²⁴ See also Susan Haack, “Preposterism and Its Consequences” (1996), in *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate* (n.9 above), 188-208.

²⁵ On the many, shifting meanings of “realism,” see Susan Haack, “Realisms and Their Rivals: Recovering Our Innocence,” *Facta Philosophica*, 4.1, March 2002: 67-88.

²⁶ On the many, shifting meanings of “naturalism,” see Susan Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry* (n.9 above), chapter 6.

²⁷ On the many, shifting meanings of “social epistemology” and “virtue epistemology,” see the foreword to the 2nd edition of Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry* (n.9 above).

²⁸ George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language,” in *In Front of Your Nose* (n.16 above), 127-40, p.129. See also Jacques Barzun, *A Word or Two Before You Go* (n.22 above).

But though many truths are vague, truth, or true-ness, is not a matter of degree. One way of arguing for this would be to rely, again, on Ramsey's formula. Another would be to point to certain kinds of linguistic evidence (though this has the disadvantage of a certain parochialism; ideally, one would need to explore the corresponding phenomena in several, preferably not-too-closely-related, languages). Still, in English at least, the evidence is pretty persuasive. The kinds of adverbial modifier we routinely use with predicates like "tall," "intelligent," or "rich," which express properties that come in degrees — modifiers like "fairly," "rather," "extremely," "unusually," "abnormally" — cannot be used to modify "true." We do, indeed, sometimes say that a statement is "quite true"; but in this use "quite" must be understood in the sense in which it is equivalent to "absolutely" or "perfectly," not in the (British) sense in which it is equivalent to "fairly" or "rather." And we sometimes say that a statement is "very true"; but this means, not that the statement is true to a high degree, but that it is not only true but also very much to the point. We also sometimes describe statements as "approximately" or "roughly" true or, more idiomatically, "roughly right." But these locutions are evidence, not that truth is a matter of degree, but that true statements may be more or less vague. "'p' is approximately true" is a useful locution; but it is dispensable in favor of the more transparent, "'approximately p' is true."²⁹

Again, some propositions, statements, etc., are, as we say, "not entirely true," but only "partially" or "half" true. (I don't believe I have ever read or heard "a third true" or "a quarter true"; but I did find John Fekete writing, in a section of his *Moral Panic* entitled "Half-truths Only, Please" of "fractional truth.")³⁰ To describe a statement as partially true may mean either of two significantly different things: (i) that it is true in part but also false in part; or (ii) that it is true but incomplete. A statement that is partially true in sense (i) (i.e., true only in part) will also be partially true in sense (ii) (i.e., not the whole truth); but the converse implication does not hold. A statement partially true in the first sense falls short because it is not *nothing but the truth*; a statement partially true in the second sense falls short because it is not *the whole truth*.

²⁹ I surveyed the linguistic evidence in more detail in "Is Truth Flat or Bumpy?", in D. H. Mellor, ed., *Prospects for Pragmatism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 1-20; reprinted in Susan Haack *Deviant Logic, Fuzzy Logic: Beyond the Formalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 243-58. See also Haack "Do We Need 'Fuzzy Logic'?", *International Journal of Man-Machine Studies*, 11, 1979: 432-45, also reprinted in *Deviant Logic, Fuzzy Logic*, 232-42.

³⁰ John Fekete, *Moral Panic: Biopolitics Rising* (Montreal: Robert Davies Publishing, 1994; 2nd, revised edition, 1995), p.97. Note added in 2011: I now realize that I was mistaken when I said I had never read "a quarter true." I had: in Sinclair Lewis's novel, *Arrowsmith*, where Dr. Max Gottlieb tells Martin Arrowsmith that "the scientist is ... so religious that he will not accept quarter truths, because they are an insult to his faith." Sinclair Lewis, *Arrowsmith* (1927; New York: Signet Classics, 1961, 1998), p.278.

The first meaning of “partially true,” “part of ‘p’ is true,” is relatively straightforward. In the simplest case, some conjunct (or conjuncts) of a conjunctive statement is (or are) true, and another (or others) false: e.g., “she was poor but she was honest” is true-in-part if she was poor but not honest, or if she was honest but not poor. In slightly less simple cases, the conjunctive character of a statement is not quite overt, but implicit in a conjunction of predicates; e.g., “he is a scholar and a gentleman” is true-in-part if he is a scholar but not a gentleman, or if he is a gentleman but not a scholar. In other cases, the implicitly conjunctive character of a statement resides in an adverbial phrase; e.g., we might describe “I last saw him on Christmas Day, 1974,” as true-in-part if I last saw him in 1974, but it wasn’t Christmas Day but Christmas Eve, or I last saw him on Christmas Day, but it was 1975, not 1974. And so on. (As I suggested in *Deviant Logic*, partial truth in this sense could be represented by a many-valued logic satisfying Emil Post’s somewhat non-standard matrices.)³¹

The second possible meaning of “‘p’ is partly true,” “‘p’ is part of the truth,” is both significantly less straightforward and significantly more interesting. After all, no statement, however comprehensive, could represent the whole truth about absolutely everything; in this sense of “partial truth,” *every* truth must be partial. So what, you might wonder, is going on when we ask a witness to swear that the evidence he will give will be “the truth, *the whole truth* and nothing but the truth”? It’s complicated; but what we ask, I take it, is not that the witness should tell the whole truth about everything, which is impossible, but that he should tell the truth as he believes it to be, *without relevant omissions*. The point is clearer when we complain that a politician didn’t tell the whole truth *about the costs of putting this proposal into effect*, that a philosophy department doesn’t tell the whole truth *about the placement record of those who successfully complete the Ph.D.*, and so on.

The most obvious way of telling less than the whole relevant truth is simply to omit relevant information; e.g., to boast that x obtained a tenure-track position at Euphoric State³² and y a visiting position at Podunk College, but omit to mention the several recent Ph.D.s who found no job at all. Another way is to use key terms in a covertly extended sense. A 1993 survey reported that 81% of women in college and university dating relationships in Canada suffered sexual abuse; but Fekete argues that this alarming figure is one of those fractional truths, because the term “sexual abuse” was used so broadly that it covered everything from being raped at knife- or gun-point to unwanted flirting.³³ Another way again — a disturbingly common form of dishonesty in academic writing in philosophy, and no doubt in other disciplines too — is the incomplete acknowledgment: noting that this small element of what you are saying is derived from someone else’s work, while at the same time quietly

³¹ See Susan Haack, *Deviant Logic* (n.29 above), pp.62-63 in both editions.

³² David Lodge, *Changing Places: A Tale of Two Campuses* (1975) (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1978).

³³ Fekete, *Moral Panic* (n.30 above), p.60.

“borrowing” other ideas of theirs with *no* acknowledgment. This sneaky little rhetorical trick (of which I have more than once been the victim) might be described as condemnation by faint — or rather, by feint! — praise.

To be sure, just what omissions constitute a failure to tell the whole (relevant) truth can be a tricky question. “About” is vague, and relevance comes in degrees. That the witness saw the defendant shoot the deceased, for example, is highly relevant to his guilt, that the witness saw the defendant in the neighborhood around the time of the crime is relevant only to a much lesser degree, and so on. Moreover, whether and if so to what degree *p* is relevant to *q* depends on matters of fact. Whether and to what degree the fact that this drug causes cancer in animals is relevant to whether it also causes cancer in humans, for example, depends on how physiologically similar the animals in question are to humans (in the relevant respects), on whether the doses were comparable given the relative size of the animal and of a human being, etc.

But that some propositions are only partly true doesn’t entail that truth, or truthness, decomposes into component parts. A partial truth in the first sense (a proposition that is not wholly true) is, strictly speaking, just plain false. And — unless it is also partially true in the first sense, only true in part — a partial truth in the second sense (a proposition that is less than the whole relevant truth) is, strictly speaking, just plain true.³⁴

2. SOME PROBLEMS WITH PARTIAL TRUTH (AND SOME VAGARIES OF VAGUENESS)

These thoughts throw some light on worries about truth in history. Any account of a past event — a battle, say, the fall of an empire, the birth of a nation — will, inevitably, be incomplete. A report of a battle, for example, will surely tell us which side won, what the consequences of this battle were for the war and perhaps for subsequent events, perhaps how many combatants were killed and how many injured, which commanders performed notably well or notably poorly, perhaps what the weather or the terrain contributed to the result, maybe even something about this general’s insistence on taking a bath every morning no matter the circumstances, or that drummer-boy’s heroism, and so on; probably not, however, how many horses were killed or tanks destroyed, and surely not how many ants or flowers were crushed during the battle, or ..., etc. It conveys only part of the whole truth about “what really happened.” But this doesn’t mean that no historical account can be (so far as it goes) true; nor, of course, that historians should give up the aspiration to discover truths about the past. That said, however, it needs to be added that the incom-

³⁴ *Contra* F. H. Bradley, who thought that nothing short of the Whole Truth About Absolutely Everything was really-and-truly true. F. H. Bradley, *Appearance and Reality: A Metaphysical Essay* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1895), pp. 320-321.

pleteness of a true-but-incomplete account may mislead, despite its truth. Reporting only battlefield casualties, for example, may mislead by distracting attention from the effects of disease or famine brought on the population at large, and so forth.

For incomplete evidence is inherently liable to be misleading, i.e., to support a conclusion that further evidence would show to be false. The writers of detective fiction understand this well: as Spenser, Robert B. Parker's laconic private eye, tells a witness who wants to know why he wants to know, "If I knew what was important to know and what wasn't, I'd have this thing pretty much solved."³⁵ Epistemologists take it for granted: the "Gettier paradoxes" with which they were preoccupied for years exploit the potential of incomplete evidence to mislead. (In describing his hypothetical cases where, he argues, someone has justified true belief but nevertheless does not know, Edmund Gettier takes for granted that a belief can be justified in virtue of evidence that is less than complete and in fact misleading, while being true for quite other reasons.)³⁶ Specialists in military intelligence sometimes recognize it: Donald Rumsfeld's much-derided but true observation, that in assessing the reliability of intelligence on Iraq the government had to deal not only with the knowns, not only with the unknowns, but also with the "unknown unknowns," implicitly acknowledged the potential of incomplete evidence to mislead.

For true poetic precision, however, I turn to novelist Jeffrey Lent:

The truth [is] not a line from here to there, and not ever-widening circles like the rings on a sawn log, but rather trails of oscillating overlapping liquids that poured forth but then assumed a shape and life of their own, that circled back around in spirals and fluctuations to touch and color all truths that came out after that one.³⁷

Precisely as Lent's melding metaphor suggests, new evidence can throw new light on things we thought we knew: "oh, he isn't being so distant because he's upset with *me*," we might say, when we learn that his child is seriously ill, "he's worried about little Johnnie, poor thing"; or "oh, maybe Vioxx isn't such a big advance in arthritis treatment as advertised," when we learn that three cases of adverse cardiovascular effects were omitted from the published report of Merck Pharmaceutical's first major clinical study, the VIGOR trial.³⁸

³⁵ Robert B. Parker, *Walking Shadow* (1994) (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1995), p.100.

³⁶ Edmund Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?", *Analysis*, 23, 1963, 121-3. See also Susan Haack, "'Know' is Just a Four-Letter Word" (1983), in the 2nd, expanded edition of *Evidence and Inquiry* (n.9 above), 000-000.

³⁷ Jeffrey Lent, *After the Fall* (New York: Vintage, 2000), pp.253-4.

³⁸ Claire Bombadier *et al.*, "Comparison of Upper Gastrointestinal Toxicity of Rofecoxib and Naproxen in Patients With Rheumatoid Arthritis," *New England Journal of Medicine*, 343.21, November 25th, 2000: 1520-28. The public learned in 2005 that the VIGOR trial, Merck's first large clinical trial of Vioxx, had tracked gastrointestinal effects (thought likely to be favorable to the drug) for longer than it tracked cardiovascular effects (thought likely to be unfavorable); so that adverse cardiovascular effects occurring during the study, but after it stopped tracking such effects, were not included in the published report. David Armstrong, "How the New England Journal Missed Warn-

And now I see that, after all, it is possible to weave that idiom, “out of true,” mentioned earlier but set aside, into the main thread of the discussion. “Out of true,” as I observed, means “slanted” or “askew”; and the effect of telling only part of the truth, we now see, can be to *slant* or to *skew* the audience’s perception of the larger truth that is not told. No doubt, also, it is because partial truth is apt to be misleading that “partial” means not only “incomplete,” as in the second sense of “partial truth,” but also “biased” (as in “no one on the committee was impartial — every one of them was more concerned to cover up the government’s/the company’s/the university’s malfeasance than to get to the bottom of the problem,” or “that wasn’t an impartial jury — the crime was so horrible that every one of them was bound and determined to convict from the outset, however weak the evidence might be”).³⁹ And perhaps Lent’s metaphor helps us see how “colorable” has come to have its two near-incompatible meanings, “seemingly valid or genuine” and “intended to deceive, counterfeit.”⁴⁰

Someone may offer us partial truth — telling us something true only in part, or telling us less than the whole truth — either unintentionally, or deliberately. You may innocently tell me something true only in part in the false belief that all of it is true; you may innocently fail to tell the whole truth relevant to the question at issue because you don’t realize that this or that is relevant. (After all, whether p is relevant to q depends on matters of fact; and if you are ignorant of or mistaken about some of those facts, you may innocently omit part of the truth.) And vagueness, similarly, may be lazy or inadvertent, or may be deliberate.

Deliberate vagueness may be benign and even essential: the provisions of a constitution, for example, must in the nature of the case be flexible enough to offer guidance for future circumstances unforeseeable at the time it is written.⁴¹ Of course, sometimes deliberately open-textured legal rules turn out to be, arguably, too easily manipulable to be as helpful as hoped: as is perhaps the case with, e.g., legal tests to determine whether proffered scientific testimony is reliable,⁴² or whether this kind of

ing Signs on Vioxx: Medical Weekly Waited Years to Report Flaws in Article that Praised Pain Drug,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 15, 2006, A.1, A.10. I tell the story in some detail in “The Integrity of Science: What It Means, Why It Matters,” in *Ética e Investigação nas Ciências da Vida — Actos do 10º Seminário do Conselho Nacional de Ética para as Ciências da Vida*, 2006: 9-28; reprinted in *Putting Philosophy to Work* (n.9 above), 103-127.

³⁹ I should note that “partial to ...” means “fond of,” as in “I am partial to dark chocolate.”

⁴⁰ *Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam Webster, 1991).

⁴¹ See also Susan Haack, “On Legal Pragmatism: Where Does ‘The Path of the Law’ Lead Us?,” *American Journal of Jurisprudence*, 50, 2005: 71-1205; “On Logic in the Law: Something, but not All,” *Ratio Juris*, 20.1, 2007: 1-31.

⁴² For example, the *Frye* Rule (n.18 above) can be made broader by narrowing the scope of the relevant field in which a novel scientific principle must be generally accepted, and narrower the broadening the scope of the field. For example, the novel scientific evidence excluded in *Frye* concerned the results of a primitive polygraph test the defendant had taken and passed, which the court argued was not yet generally accepted among psychologists and linguists; had the court confined the

government action constitutes an establishment of religion.⁴³ And sometimes the intent behind deliberate vagueness is not benign; the hope is to evade awkward issues, or to mislead one's audience.

Like deliberate vagueness, deliberately partial truth is sometimes benign, both in intent and in effect. When you ask me what I think of your new dress, and — tactfully omitting to mention its unflattering style — I tell you that it's a really nice color, I may be telling you only part of the truth in hopes of sparing your feelings. When a physician emphasizes the instances in which this treatment has been successful, and downplays its high failure-rate and awful side-effects, he may be telling only part of the truth in hopes of persuading the patient to take the only chance of recovery he has, of keeping him optimistic enough not to give up and turn his face to the wall.

Justice Darling, whom I quoted at the beginning of this paper, was reflecting on the weaknesses of the testimony of lay witnesses (his opinion of the testimony of expert witnesses, by the way, was even lower). Still, in our adversarial legal system it is expected that each party will highlight the parts of the truth that best serve his side of the case, and that attorneys will craft questions to their witnesses narrowly, so that they can tell the whole truth relevant to this very specific question without letting anything incriminating slip. The hope is that the part of the truth that one side omits will be brought to light by the other side, by the presentation of contrary witnesses, or under cross-examination, or both; which, I take it, is part of the epistemological rationale for the adversary system.⁴⁴ (Sometimes, it works as hoped;⁴⁵ often, I fear, it does not.)⁴⁶

relevant community to the much smaller class of polygraph examiners, however, the upshot would have been different. In *Daubert* (n.18 above) the U.S. Supreme Court provided a flexible list of factors courts might consider in screening proffered scientific testimony for reliability; these too have proved manipulable. For example, such testimony has been deemed admissible on the grounds that it is based on work which was peer-reviewed, but also admitted despite not having been peer-reviewed; and excluded on the grounds that it is based on work that has not been peer-reviewed, but also excluded despite having been peer-reviewed. See Susan Haack, "Peer Review and Publication: Lessons for Lawyers," *Stetson Law Review*, 36.7, 2007: 789-819, for details.

⁴³ The test articulated in *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, 403 U.S. 602 (1971) was that a statute is compatible with the Establishment Clause iff (i) it has a secular legislative purpose; (ii) its primary effect is neither to advance nor to inhibit religion; and (iii) it does not foster excessive entanglement with religion. In subsequent decisions, the "entanglement" clause became a kind of Catch-22, as state actions intended to ensure that a statute did not advance religion were taken themselves to constitute "excessive entanglement." The current understanding of the second prong of the *Lemon* test — first proposed by Justice O'Connor in her concurrence in *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668 (1984), and adopted by the majority in its ruling in *County of Allegheny v. ACLU*, 492 U.S. 573 (1989) — requires that the statute not convey to an objective observer that the government endorses or that it disapproves of religion. This "endorsement test" can be made stronger or weaker, obviously, depending on what exactly that hypothetical "objective observer" is assumed to know.

⁴⁴ The celebrated evidence scholar John Wigmore famously described cross-examination as "the greatest legal engine ever invented for the discovery of truth." John H. Wigmore, *Evidence* (Boston:

But I want to focus now, not on the very special case of adversarial legal procedure, but on more straightforward cases where someone deliberately tells less than the whole truth with the intention of misleading his audience to his own benefit and their disadvantage. Or perhaps I should say, I say “deliberately or quasi-deliberately”; because very often what is going on might best be described as, if not quite intentional, willful nonetheless. As Cardinal Newman observed, “[i]t is not in human nature to deceive others, for any long time, without, in a measure, deceiving ourselves.”⁴⁷ When telling only the palatable or the favorable part of the truth gets to be a habit, you can easily find yourself conveniently forgetting the omitted facts, and starting to believe that this, partial truth is the whole relevant truth of the matter. The distinction between someone’s being unintentionally misleading in telling us only part of the truth and his being deliberately misleading is clear enough in principle; but in practice things aren’t nearly so clear-cut. (The same goes for the distinction I took for granted earlier between someone’s being unintentionally vague and his being deliberately so. While in principle the difference is clear enough, in real life the line is often hard to draw; for conveniently self-induced fogginess is no less ubiquitous, probably, than convenient forgetting of unpalatable aspects of the truth. As I might say, echoing Newman: it is not in human nature to fudge issues to others, for any long time, without, in a measure, fudging them in one’s own mind too.)

Even when someone tells only part of the truth innocently believing it to be the whole truth of the matter, we may sometimes feel that he should have been more forthcoming; not of course that he should, *per impossible*, have told us the relevant facts of which he was unaware, but that it would have been desirable for him to have

Little, Brown & Co., 1904), § 1367, “Cross-Examination as a Distinctive and Vital Feature of Our Law.”

⁴⁵ See, e.g., *Blum v. Merrell Dow Pharmaceuticals, Inc.*, 1 Pa. D. & C. 4th 634 (1998) where, evidently, the Blums’ attorney’s cross-examination revealed that the consensus in the peer-reviewed scientific literature that Bendectin was harmless had been artificially created by the company itself. The case (which was eventually, in 2002, decided by the Pennsylvania Supreme Court in favor of Merrell Dow) is discussed in some detail in my “Peer Review and Publication: Lessons for Lawyers” (n.42 above).

⁴⁶ See e.g., *Barefoot v. Estelle*, 803 U.S. 880 (1983). Mr. Barefoot had been sentenced to death after two psychiatrists testified (as required by the Texas death-penalty statute) that he would be dangerous in future. The U.S. Supreme Court found that Mr. Barefoot’s constitutional rights had not been violated. Though an amicus brief from the American Psychiatric Association acknowledged that psychiatric predictions of future dangerousness were wrong two times out of three, Justice White, writing for the majority, brushed this aside, noting that Mr. Barefoot’s attorneys had the opportunity to cross-examine the prosecution’s witnesses, and to produce contrary testimony. See also Marvin Frankel, “The Search for Truth: An Umpireal View,” *University of Pennsylvania Law Review*, 123.5, 1975: 1031-59; Susan Haack, “Epistemology Legalized: Or, Truth, Justice, and the American Way,” *American Journal of Jurisprudence*, 49, 2004: 43-61.

⁴⁷ John. Henry Newman, *Parochial Sermons* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1843), vol. I, sermon X, “Profession Without Practice.”

added that he may not know everything relevant, or even everything about what facts are relevant. And even when someone deliberately or quasi-deliberately tells only part of the truth from motives of kindness or tact, we sometimes might feel that it would have been better had he been more forthcoming: perhaps, for example, that I would have been a better friend had I tactfully suggested that, while the dress was a really nice color, it was a bit too clingy for the job interview at which you were planning to wear it; or that it would have been kinder for the physician not to have raised false hope, but instead to have helped the patient come to terms with the inevitable.

Deliberately or quasi-deliberately withholding part of the truth with benign intent is analogous to telling a white lie. Deliberately or quasi-deliberately withholding part of the truth in hopes of misleading your audience to your own benefit is, by my lights anyway, analogous to a plain old (black?) lie. “Analogous to,” but not “the same as” — which, I think, begins to explain why the temptation to mislead by telling others less than the whole truth, and to persuade oneself that this something-less-than-the-whole-truth *is* the whole truth of the matter, is so strong. The reasons for deceiving others, from simple self-interest to reluctance to be the bearer of bad news, are familiar enough. But telling less than the whole truth is very often an especially attractive way of going about deceiving others; it is psychologically easier, because it is perceived as morally less offensive than lying. If you tell me only part of the (relevant) truth, you can tell yourself that *you haven't actually lied to me*. You may well mislead me; and if you omit part of the truth with the intention that I be misled, you are guilty of deception — but not of outright lying. And we tend to have much less compunction about misleading others by this subtler and apparently more defensible route than we would about lying outright. The philosophy department that reveals only part of the truth about its placement record, for example, may manage to feel absolved by the thought that it has been very careful to ensure that everything in its graduate prospectus is true.⁴⁸

In just one week while I was writing this paper, two articles in the *Wall Street Journal* caught my eye: one, noting that pharmaceutical companies are under no obligation to publish all the studies they conduct and submit to the FDA,⁴⁹ reported that “the effectiveness of a dozen popular anti-depressants has been exaggerated by the selective publication of favorable results,”⁵⁰ and that this has led many doctors to make inappropriate decisions about when and to which patients to prescribe such medications; the other, urging that “[t]oo often, chief executives sugarcoat the truth. That’s more dangerous than ever,” quoted James M. Kilts, former CEO of Nabisco:

⁴⁸ This is a sanitized version of a true story painfully close to home.

⁴⁹ Food and Drug Administration (the federal agency that must approve drugs and medical devices before they can be marketed in the U.S.).

⁵⁰ David Armstrong and Keith J. Winstein, “Antidepressants Under Scrutiny over Efficacy: Sweeping Overview Suggests Suppression of Negative Data Has Distorted View of Drugs,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 17, 2008, D.1, D.3. The quotation is from p. D.1.

“[m]any times it’s the thing not said ... that gets a CEO in trouble.”⁵¹ Indeed, deliberate and quasi-deliberate deception by partial truth seems to be absolutely ubiquitous — a good deal commoner, I suspect, than the Lie Direct — in business, in advertising, in politics, and, I am sorry to say, in the academy too. That, however, is another story for another occasion.⁵²

⁵¹ Kaja Whitehouse, “Why CEOs Need To Be Honest With Their Boards,” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 14, 2008, R.1, R.3. The quotations are from p. R.1.

⁵² My thanks to Mark Migotti, for helpful comments on a draft; to Helen Wohl, of the University of Miami Law Library, for help in tracking down relevant materials; and to María-José Frápolli, for the talk entitled “Nothing but the Truth” that she gave at the 2007 National Colloquium on Philosophy of Language in San Leopoldo, Brazil, which gave me the idea for my title.