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Susan Haack on Twardowski's refutation of the relativity of truth

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dozwolonego użytku.

Susan Haack

Professor Twardowski and the Relativist Menace¹

I understand from the editor that this special issue* of *Filozofia Nauki* is to take on some very large questions about the concept of truth in epistemology, and specifically about what constraints its epistemological role might impose on how this concept must be understood. My remit, however, is quite narrow: to comment on the similarities, and the differences, between the paper of mine reprinted here, “The Whole Truth and Nothing but the Truth,” and the paper of Kazimierz Twardowski’s, “On So-Called Relative Truths.” But this apparently modest task turns out to be much less straightforward than I had imagined when I agreed to take it on. My paper and Twardowski’s are on different topics — mine on partial truth, his on relativism; and while there are a few brief remarks about relativism to be found in my paper, these allude to other work of mine with which readers of this volume may not be familiar. Moreover, the more general issues about the role of the concept of truth in epistemology seem to me only in part to do with relativism. So it seems best to take this opportunity to put my comments on Twardowski’s paper in the context of my thoughts about the larger issues at stake here.

We have a saying in English: “If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is” — a saying which, I’m afraid, came unbidden to my mind when I realized that Prof. Twardowski apparently hoped to dispose of relativism in a single short paper. I don’t believe he has succeeded. To explain why not, however, is a little complicated; for the trouble lies, not simply in the anti-relativist arguments Twardowski offers (though, as I shall point out, these are indeed flawed), but more fundamentally in the way he construes relativism in the first place.

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* Eventually we decided to frame the material into special blocks within two subsequent regular issues, the first of them being the present issue (editor’s note).

If I understand him correctly, Twardowski takes relativism to be a single, simple thesis, the thesis that *there are relative truths*. Although he acknowledges specifically ethical and epistemological forms of relativism, he construes these as special cases of the general thesis; so that ethical relativism becomes the thesis that there are relative ethical truths, epistemic relativism the thesis that there are relative epistemological truths — and, presumably, so on. It is, of course, because he construes relativism as a single, simple thesis that Twardowski thinks it can be demolished at a single stroke.

Twardowski's supposedly single, simple line of argument is actually quite lengthy, since he marches through example after example of supposed relative truths, arguing that they can all be explained away: while there may be *statements* that are true in some circumstances but false in others, these never express the same *judgments* in the different circumstances. This strategy, as I will point out, raises an obvious problem: no argument-by-elimination could be as devastating as Twardowski supposes unless it was completely exhaustive. Moreover, even with respect to the examples on which Twardowski focuses, I will show, his argument is inconclusive, because it relies on an unclear and unexplained concept of *judgment*, and the unjustified assumption that only judgments are literally true or false. And, I shall argue, there is also a further, deeper problem: Twardowski's understanding of relativism is inadequate — he has far too simple a picture of what is really a very complex phenomenon indeed. With these critical arguments in place, it will only remain to explain, by way of conclusion, why getting a clear view of the role the concept of truth would play in an adequate epistemological theory requires something more, and something subtler, than simply eschewing relativism.

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So, first, let me explain why I find Twardowski's attempt to persuade us that there are no relative truths unsatisfactory. The first thing to notice is that he never actually gives any explicit arguments that there are no relative truths; the only arguments he makes explicitly are to the effect that *no judgments are relatively true*. A key passage is this one:

[T]here are no judgements which are true only in certain circumstances, under certain conditions, and which would cease to be true, becoming false, with a change in those circumstances and conditions. ... [Relativists] cite examples of statements which express judgements that are sometimes true, at other times false, but they fail to establish that the true judgement and the false judgement expressed by means of the same statement are actually one and the same judgement.

In line with this, most of Twardowski's paper is taken up with arguments to the effect that one or another supposed example of a relative truth succumbs to the objection that (if we really have case of the same statement expressing a true judgment at time t_1 but a false judgment at time t_2 , or a true judgment in place p_1 but a false in place p_2 , etc.), this statement does not express the same judgment at both times or in both places. The first problem is obvious: it is impossible to establish the perfectly general

thesis at which Twardowski is aiming except by dealing with *all* its instances; which, needless to say, he doesn't do. The second, less obvious problem is that, even with respect to the instances with which he does deal, his arguments are at best inconclusive.

To be sure, in the course of these arguments Twardowski makes some points with which I would happily agree: for example, that much of our ordinary speech is elliptical. He also, however, makes other claims that seem to me obviously mistaken: for example, that "it is raining here and now" is ambiguous, because the word "now" changes its meaning at each occurrence. He even says that, when uttered at that time, "the little word 'now' has exactly the same meaning as 'on December 17, 1889; in accordance with the Gregorian calendar; at 0:13 in the morning; Central European time.'" I couldn't agree less; I think it is part of the meaning of "now" that it refers to the time at which it is uttered; i.e., that the variability of reference of indexical expressions is a consequence of their constant meaning.

In any case, most to the present purpose, Twardowski's argument that there are no relatively true judgments simply can't work unless we are given some well-motivated account of the criteria for individuating judgments, i.e., for determining when we have one judgment, and when more than one. But all Twardowski tells us about judgments here is that they are "mental products" (and a translator's note reporting that in the German version of the paper Twardowski had used the word "Tätigkeit" (action) rather than "product," only makes matters worse). Given his remarks about indexicals, I felt some concern that Twardowski might be obliged to attribute judgments to a person that he would not assent to if asked (imagine, for example, someone who says "it is raining here now," but has no idea where he is, or what the time is, when he speaks). But my main concern is that, without adequate criteria of identity-and-individuation of judgments, it is hard to avoid the suspicion that Twardowski is just covertly individuating judgments in whatever way will make his thesis come out true.

This suspicion is further heightened when Twardowski comments, à propos of ethical relativism, that the explanation of ethical disagreements may be that we "link a different concept with the term 'good'" than people did in other times; and so that, once again, the same statement may not express the same judgment. But this takes us not one step nearer the conclusion Twardowski wants unless and until he tells us how to determine when *x* and *y* link the same concept to a word, and when a different one; which — again, perhaps needless to say — he does not. In fact, it looks as if he is just covertly individuating concepts, as well as judgments, in whatever way will make his thesis come out true.

But suppose for the sake of argument that Twardowski *had* succeeded in showing that no judgments are relatively true. The conclusion he really needs, that there are no relative truths, *still* wouldn't follow without the help of a further assumption: that judgments are the only truth-bearers. But I can find no argument in Twardowski's paper for this assumption, only the bare assertion that "truth applies to [statements] only in a figurative sense." But — while perhaps it could be argued

that, e.g., as applied to a joint or beam or shelf that is hung exactly square, “true” is used figuratively, or at least in an extended sense — I find the idea that “true” in “true statement” is figurative counter-intuitive in the extreme. In my experience, anyway, the locutions most commonly heard in ordinary speech are “true statement” and “true belief”; “true theory,” “true claim,” and “true verdict” are already just a little theoretical; and “true judgment” (like “true sentence”) is largely a philosopher’s usage, heard sometimes in technical talk, but relatively rarely in idiomatic speech.

Moreover, Twardowski simply assumes that the question, “what kinds of thing can be true or false?” has a single, correct answer; but I am not convinced there is any fact of the matter here. This, of course is why, in my paper, I wrote:

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.*) ... [But t]hat some truths are relative to a place, time, culture, legal system, etc., does not entail that what it is to be true is similarly relative.

— for, as the sentence I have italicized here indicates, my inclination is to take a relaxed, pragmatic attitude on the question of truth-bearers.

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Twardowski’s arguments are covertly premised on the assumption that relativism is a single, simple position. I think, on the contrary, that “relativism” refers, not to one thesis, but a whole unruly family of related theses, to the effect that something is relative, in some sense, to something. Some years ago,² I developed a table of varieties of relativism, which I reproduce below:

Varieties of Relativism

... is relative to —

1: meaning	a: language
2: reference	b: conceptual scheme
3: truth	c: theory
4: metaphysical commitment	d: scientific paradigm
5: ontology	e: version, depiction, description
6: reality	f: culture
7: epistemic values	g: community
8: moral values	h: individual

² In “Reflections on Relativism: From Momentous Tautology to Seductive Contradiction,” James E. Tomberlin, ed., *Philosophical Perspectives, 10: Metaphysics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966), 298-314; in the Supplement to *Noûs*, 1996: 298-314; and reprinted in Haack, *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate: Unfashionable Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 149-166.

9: aesthetic values

I went on to distinguish two meanings of “is relative to”: “makes sense only relativized to” (in which sense the table gives us various versions of *philosophical* relativism); and “varies depending on” (in which sense the table gives us various versions of *anthropological* relativism). Here, I shall focus on philosophical relativisms exclusively.

Not every permutation of elements from my right-hand and my left-hand columns represents a view that has ever seriously been held; but many of them do. Quine’s thesis of ontological relativity, for example, would be 5:c, Goodman’s pluralistic irrealism 6:e, and (one interpretation of) Kuhn’s thesis of the incommensurability of scientific paradigms 7:d. Ethical relativism, epistemological relativism and relativism, with respect to truth are all importantly different (congeries of) positions; and relativism-with-respect to truth is itself not one position, but several distinct positions. Tarski’s thesis that the truth of sentences (or, strictly, of wffs in a formal language) is language-relative, for example, would be 3:a; while the much more radical theses that truth is relative to theory, paradigm, culture, or community would be, respectively, 3:c, 3:d, 3:f, and 3:g.

Moreover, as this makes clear, my conception of relativism differs from Twardowski’s not only in its acknowledgment of a whole raft of distinguishable relativist theses, but in another way as well. As I conceive it, philosophical relativism with respect to truth (the only form of relativism even mentioned in “The Whole Truth and Nothing but the Truth”) is a congeries of theses *about the concept of truth*; similarly, ethical relativism is a congeries of theses about such concepts as *good* and *right*, and epistemological relativism a congeries of theses about such concepts as *relevant evidence* and *warrant*. In line with this, my approach to relativism with respect to truth relies in part on the distinction between the abstract use of “truth,” to refer to the concept of truth or the property of being true, and its concrete use of the word — in which it takes both the indefinite article and the plural form — to refer to particular propositions, beliefs, etc., that are true.

This distinction was already made in my paper “The Unity of Truth and the Plurality of Truths”,³ and it is central to the arguments of “The Whole Truth and Nothing but the Truth”: that, though there are many and various truths, there is only one truth; that, though some truths are about things of our making, truth is objective; that, though some truths are vague, truth does not come in degrees; that, though some propositions are only partly true, truth does not decompose into parts; and — the key claim for present purposes — that, though some true propositions make sense only relative to a time, place, legal system, culture, etc., truth is not relative.

Relativism with respect to truth, as I understand it, is a congeries of claims to the effect that *truth* — the property of being true, trueness — is relative to something

³ Susan Haack, “The Unity of Truth and the Plurality of Truths,” *Principia*, 9 (1-2), 2005:87-110; reprinted in Haack, *Putting Philosophy to Work: Inquiry and Its Place in Culture* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2008), 129-46.

else; so that the best way of showing that such claims are false is to give a plausible account of truth which is *not* relative to language, culture, community, or etc. Ramsey's laconicism, as I suggested briefly in "The Whole Truth" and argued in more detail in "The Unity of Truth," supplies the basis of such an account. For what it tells us is that a proposition is true if it is the proposition that p, and p, and not otherwise; which manifestly does not relativize truth to anything. Twardowski, however — at least in this paper — very pointedly avoids ever using the word "truth" in the singular; even the title of his paper, you will notice, is "On So-Called Relative Truths," and not, as you might have expected, "On So-Called Relative Truth." Not surprisingly, then, he has no account of the meaning of truth to offer; and in consequence is in no position to argue that there is a plausible understanding of the concept in which it is not relative.

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All this, however, leaves us a very long way from an understanding of the role of the concept of truth in epistemology; which, as I said, seems to me only in part to do with relativism.

As I see it, the concept of truth plays a significant epistemological role — but a supporting role, not the starring one. The concepts of justification or warrant have to be understood in terms of evidence and evidential quality; and concepts of such virtues as intellectual honesty have to be understood in terms of inquirers' relations to evidence. The concept of truth will play its epistemological role in the background, in the understanding of these concepts: to believe that p, for example, is to hold p true; evidence that p is evidence that p is true; what standards of evidential quality have to be to be good is truth-indicative; an intellectually honest inquirer wants to discover the truth, whatever the color of that truth may be; and so on.

But while an adequate epistemology does, I think, require a robust conception of truth, no conception of truth, however robust, can by itself do all the work of epistemology. I think in this context of Karl Popper's account of (as he says) "objective knowledge." Popper endorses Tarski's semantic theory of truth,⁴ which he takes to be a version of the correspondence theory, and to guarantee that truth is both "absolute" and "objective." (Tarski himself treats "correspondence" very gingerly and at arms' length; and he insists that the definition of truth must be language-relative.⁵ But I set

⁴ See Karl R. Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (1934: English ed., London: Hutchinson, 1959), p.278 n*1; *Objective Knowledge* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972).

⁵ See Alfred Tarski, "The Semantic Concept of Truth" (1944), in Herbert Feigl and Wilfrid Sellars, eds., *Readings in Philosophical Analysis* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1949), 52-84, p.54 (claiming that several accounts of truth, among them the correspondence theory, "can lead to various misunderstandings" and that "none of them can be considered a satisfactory definition"). Compare Karl R. Popper, *Unended Quest: An Intellectual Autobiography* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1974), p.98 (reporting that in 1935, when Tarski explained his theory of truth to him, he realized that "[Tarski] had finally rehabilitated the much maligned correspondence theory of truth").

these issues aside for now.) The main point here is that, even if Popper did have an absolute, objective, correspondence theory of truth in hand, this by itself would be manifestly insufficient to establish the objectivity of knowledge. In fact, as I argued in excruciating detail in chapter 5 of *Evidence and Inquiry*,⁶ Popper's epistemology is really a kind of covert skepticism. He uses the *phrase* "objective scientific knowledge" over and over; but as he understands it, this phrase refers to a body of speculative conjectures — conjectures which are not believed, may not be true, and are never justified. No account of truth, however robustly "absolute" and "objective," can transmute this covert skepticism into a theory of objective scientific knowledge.

Like Popper, Alvin Goldman thinks of truth as correspondence, but he could not, like Popper, be called a covert skeptic; for he actually offers an account — or rather, as we will see, several accounts — of epistemic justification. But, like Popper, Goldman places far more epistemological weight on the concept of truth than it can carry: for his understanding of epistemic justification is reliabilist, i.e., couched in terms of the truth-ratios of belief-forming processes. But, as I argued in excruciating detail in chapter 7 of *Evidence and Inquiry*, Goldman's repeated shifts — between accounts that are genuinely reliabilist, but clearly false, and more plausible accounts which, however, have covertly abandoned reliabilism⁷ — only reveal the inadequacy of the entire approach.

However, though a robust concept of truth is not sufficient by itself for an adequate epistemology, it is necessary. Now I think of Stephen Stich, who in *The Fragmentation of Reason*⁸ assures us that "once we have a clear view of the matter" we will see that there is no value in having true beliefs: once we grasp that truth is only one of a whole range of semantic properties — truth, truth*, truth**, truth***, ..., etc., that a belief might have, and that sometimes a person would be better off with a true* belief — by which it turns out Stich means a *false* belief that would enable the person to avoid some danger or achieve some desired end — than with a true belief, we will realize that valuing truth in our beliefs is "a profoundly conservative thing to do." Stich proposes a new, radical, "post -analytic" epistemology that would focus on figuring out what belief-forming processes would yield beliefs that would enable us to get what we value — whether that be fame, fortune, power, or whatever. (Honestly: I am not making this up!) As I argued in excruciating detail in chapter 9 of *Evidence and Inquiry*, this bizarre idea — which would apparently turn epistemology into a search for more effective means of self-deception — blithely ignores

⁶ Susan Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry: Towards Reconstruction in Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993; 2nd, expanded edition, Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2009).

⁷ See Alvin Goldman, "What is Justified Belief?", in George Pappas, ed., *Justification and Knowledge* (Dordrecht, the Netherlands, 1979) 1-23; *Epistemology and Cognition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986); "Two Concepts of Justification," in James Tomberlin, ed., *Philosophical Perspectives, 2: Epistemology* (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview Press, 1988), 51-70.

⁸ Stephen P. Stich, *The Fragmentation of Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Bradford Books, MIT Press, 1990).

the fact that the concept of belief is internally related to the concept of truth, that to believe that *p* is to hold *p* true.

Unlike Stich, who urges epistemologists to get into the business of identifying more efficient techniques of self-deception, Richard Rorty urges that epistemologists shut up shop and go out of business altogether.⁹ Insofar as he offers arguments for his claim that epistemology is misconceived — Rorty doesn't really *believe* in arguments, or so he says — they turn, in the end, on a repudiation of (as he says) “foundationalism”: which means, in this context, the idea that standards of epistemic justification are not purely conventional, but need objective grounding in their relation to the truth. This “foundationalism,” Rorty suggests, requires a high-flown but hopeless notion of truth as Correspondence to the Unconditioned. But if, instead, we adopt the “homely and shopworn” sense in which truth means “whatever you can defend against all comers” — the sense of “truth,” he claims, that Tarski and Davidson are attending to (!)¹⁰ — we will see that foundationalism is false, and epistemic justification just a matter of a convention. As I argued in excruciating detail, again in chapter 9 of *Evidence and Inquiry*, this whole farrago depends, at bottom, on a grossly false dichotomy: *either* truth is Correspondence to Something Grandly Metaphysical, *or else* it is purely a conversational conception. But these are obviously not the only possibilities. *Between* Rorty's conversationalist conception and his false contrast, the grandly transcendental, there are (at least) the following:

- Peirce's conception of truth as the final opinion that would be agreed were inquiry continued indefinitely;
- Ramsey's laconicist conception, according to which a belief is true just in case it is the belief that *p*, and *p* (and the various minimalist, etc., recent variations on this theme);
- Tarski's semantic theory;
- The various versions of the correspondence theory, from Wittgenstein's and Russell's Logical Atomist accounts of truth as the isomorphism of a proposition to a fact, to J. L. Austin's conception of truth as a coincidence of conventions linking statements and states of affairs.

I take it that what theory of truth is best is a matter of what theory of truth is *true*. (If the true theory of truth turned out to undermine the legitimacy of epistemological concepts, that would be too bad — epistemology really would be misconceived.) However, as I argued in “The Unity of Truth and the Plurality of Truths,” I believe that something along the lines of Ramsey's laconicist account is correct; and this account, happily, is robustly objective and realist enough for epistemological purposes.

⁹ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979).

¹⁰ I assure you I am not making *this* up, either!

But the point with which I will conclude for now is that, though an adequate epistemology does indeed require a robust conception of truth, what “robust” means here is not simply “non-relativist.” Though conceptions of truth as relative to community, theory, culture, etc., *will* impede epistemological theory, Tarski’s theory of truth as language-relative need not;¹¹ and sometimes, as in the hands of a Stich or a Rorty, non-relativist conceptions of truth will be as serious an epistemological impediment as (most) relativist conceptions.¹²

¹¹ Though the fact that Tarski’s theory applies only to well-behaved formal languages *will*, I think, be an obstacle.

¹² My thanks to Mark Migotti for helpful comments on a draft.