THE UNITY OF TRUTH AND THE PLURALITY OF TRUTHS

SUSAN HAACK[1]
University of Miami

Abstract

There is one truth, but many truths: i.e., one unambiguous, non-relative truth-concept, but many and various propositions that are true. One truth-concept: to say that a proposition is true is to say (not that anyone, or everyone, believes it, but) that things are as it says; but many truths: particular empirical claims, scientific theories, historical propositions, mathematical theorems, logical principles, textual interpretations, statements about what a person wants or believes or intends, about grammatical and legal rules, etc., etc. But, as Frank Ramsey once said, "There is no platitude so obvious that eminent philosophers have not denied it"; and as soon as you ask why anyone would deny that there is one truth-concept, or that there are many true propositions, it becomes apparent that my initial, simple formula disguises many complexities.

> The ordinary man knows only one kind of truth, in the ordinary sense of the word. He cannot imagine what a higher or a highest truth may be. Truth seems to him no more capable of comparative degrees than death... Perhaps you will think as I do that he is right in this. – Sigmund Freud.[2]

"True" has a large extended family of uses. Polonius's advice to Laertes, "To thine own self be true... Thou canst not then be false to any man,"[3] reminds us that the root of our word "true," the Old English "*treowe*," meant "faithful." In some uses, "true" retains this older meaning still: when you apply for a British passport, your unflattering photograph must be endorsed by some responsible person – a doctor, clergyman, schoolteacher, or whatever – in these words: "I certify that

this is a true likeness of... "; and we speak not only of true likenesses but of true friends, true followers, and true believers. Then again, we say that the frog is "not a true reptile," or describe a joint or beam as "out of true." But I shall set these uses aside to focus, as philosophers do, on truth as it applies to propositions, statements, beliefs, etc., when they are, as the Oxford English Dictionary puts it, "in accordance with fact or reality, not false or erroneous."

My thesis, with respect to this use, will be that *there is one truth, but many truths*: i.e., one unambiguous, non-relative truth-concept, but many and various propositions, etc., that are true. One truth-concept: to say that a claim is true is to say (not that anyone, or everyone, believes it, or that it follows from this or that theory, or that there is good evidence for it, but) simply that things are as it says. But many truths: particular empirical claims, scientific theories, historical propositions, mathematical theorems, logical principles, textual interpretations, statements about what a person wants or believes or intends, statements about grammatical, social, or legal roles and rules, etc., etc. Put like this, my thesis sounds almost embarrassingly simple, even naive. Still – as Frank Ramsey said in a closely related context – "there is no platitude so obvious that eminent philosophers have not denied it";[4] and as soon as you ask why anyone would deny that there is one truth-concept, or that there are many true propositions, it becomes apparent that my initial, simple formulation disguises many complexities.

Someone might deny that there is one truth-concept either because he thinks that there is more than one such concept, or else because he thinks that there is none. In the first category (those who hold that there is more than one truth-concept) are those who think that "true" must have different meanings as applied to different kinds of proposition, the empirical and the mathematical or the ethical, for example, or the scientific and the literary or the theological; those who think that truth is relative to the individual, or to culture, community, theory, or conceptual scheme; and Tarski and those who follow him in proposing a hierarchy of language-relative truth-predicates. In the second category (those who hold that there is no truth-concept) are those who believe, or profess to, that the concept of truth is nothing but rhetorical or ideological humbug.

Someone might deny that there are many true propositions either because he thinks that there are no true propositions, or else because he thinks that there is only one. Those who deny that there is any legitimate truth-concept would, or should, also deny that there are any true propositions; and F. H. Bradley, maintaining that no actual judgment is better than partially true, seems to have thought that nothing short of The Whole Truth About Everything is really-and-truly true. Most often, though, those who apparently deny that there are many truths are really maintaining that there is only one *kind* of true proposition; perhaps because (like Bradley) they are committed to an idealist picture according to which the only genuine truth is about the Reality behind the Appearances, or perhaps because they are committed to a strong reductionism according to which the only ultimate truths are the truths of physics, or, etc.

By exploring these arguments against it and articulating where they go wrong, I hope gradually to bring out the subtleties of my deceptively simple-sounding thesis, and in the process to begin building a robust defense.

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Let me start, then, with the arguments for a plurality of truth-concepts: first for multiple senses of "true," and then for the relativity of truth to culture, community, theory, conceptual scheme, or language.

The way we ascertain that it is true that $7 + 5 = 12$ seems very different from the way we ascertain that it is true that DNA is a double-helical, backbone-out macromolecule with like-with-unlike base pairs. What makes it true that there are marsupial mice in Australia, or that, for every planet, the square of its period of revolution around the sun divided by the third power of its mean distance from the sun is a constant, seems very different from what makes it true that an unlawful homicide occurring in the commission or attempted commission of a felony constitutes first-degree murder, or from what makes it true that Daniel Deronda was brought up in ignorance of his Jewish descent. So perhaps it is no wonder that it has sometimes been supposed that true propositions are *so* varied and *so* heterogeneous that

there can't be just one concept of truth, but must be many – mathematical truth, scientific truth, legal truth, literary truth, and so forth. But the heterogeneity of true propositions doesn't require a plurality of truth-concepts.

Any plausible definition of truth must take for granted the Aristotelian Insight that "to say of what is that it is, or of what is not that it is not, is true":[5] the various correspondence theories, which turn that emphatic adverb for which we reach when we say that *p* is true just in case *really*, *in fact*, *p*, into serious metaphysics; Tarski's semantic theory; and Ramsey's "redundancy" theory and its present-day minimalist, deflationist, and disquotationalist descendants. Of these, Ramsey's seems to be the simplest and most direct: "[my] definition that a belief is true if it is 'a belief that *p*' and *p*, but false if it is 'a belief that *p*' and – *p* is ... substantially that of Aristotle ... a belief that Smith is either a liar or a fool is true if Smith is either a liar or a fool, and not otherwise." Or again: "the most certain thing about truth is that '*p* is true' and '*p*,' if not identical, are equivalent"; truth is "when a man believes that A is B and A *is* B."[6]

However, the old label, "redundancy theory,"[7] is misleading: though Ramsey held that "true" is eliminable from direct truth-attributions like "it is true that Caesar crossed the Rubicon," he realized that it is indispensable for indirect truth-ascriptions like "he is always right." Since the newer labels "disquotationalism," "minimalism," and "deflationism" seem rather vague and variable in their reference, I prefer the term coined by my former student, Dr. Kiriake Xerohemona: "laconicism"; for Ramsey's account is undeniably "terse, concise," and as the etymology of "laconicist" suggests, Spartan.

Ramsey's laconicism is incomplete; most significantly, explaining those indirect truth-attributions requires an account of propositional quantifiers that doesn't itself depend on the concept of truth.[8] Moreover, laconicism obviously doesn't give us a criterion of truth;[9] and it leaves many issues about representation and reality open. But this, at least, is hardly surprising; for Ramsey aspires precisely to capture the core meaning of "true" – to articulate the highest common factor of the truth-concept in all its many applications. Whatever kind of proposition is said to be true, what is said of it is the same: that it is the proposition that *p*, and *p*; or, as I put it earlier, that things are as it says.

However, what the relevant things are depends on the proposition in question: which is why what makes a proposition of one kind true can be very different from what makes a proposition of another kind true, and why, depending on what kind of a proposition it is the truth-value of which we want to ascertain, we may set out to find a proof, or send a team to Australia to catalogue the wildlife of the bush, or, etc.

The case of truth in literature is special enough to deserve its own paragraph. Sometimes talk of "literary truth" refers to the truth of claims about fictional characters – such as Daniel Deronda, who wasn't a real person, but a central character in George Eliot's novel of the same name. To say that it is true that Daniel Deronda was brought up in ignorance of his Jewish descent is, I take it, simply to say that *according to the novel* Deronda was brought up in ignorance of his Jewish descent (of course, the meaning of "according to the novel" isn't perfectly transparent; but this is not the place to try to spell it out). Sometimes, however, talk of "literary truth" refers to the truths about real human beings and real human doings which are conveyed by a fictional narrative, such as the truths about the Power of Ignorance conveyed in this novel of Eliot's.[10] These are regular truths about real human beings and real human doings; they aren't special, superfine literary truths. What is special and superfine is the skill and subtlety with which Eliot conveys the truth that ignorance can be a powerful force in a person's life, and in the lives of those around him or her; but the truth that is conveyed is true in just the usual sense.

Sometimes we say that something is "true for you, but not for me"; but this is just a careless way of saying either that you believe whatever-it-is (that tax cuts will stimulate the economy, that life on earth was seeded from other planets, or, etc.) but I don't, or else that whatever-it-is (being over six feet tall, or liking Wagner, or, etc.) is true *of* you, but not of me. The example, simple as it is, points to two main sources of the idea that truth is subjective or relative, and hence that there is no one truth, simpliciter, but only truth-for-you and truth-for-me, or only truth-for-this-culture and truth-for-that-culture: a confusion of truth with belief, and a confusion of truth with truth-of.

Students sometimes write, meaning that Descartes believed that the mind and the body are distinct substances, that "for Descartes, the mind and the body are distinct substances"; and this unhappy way of putting it sometimes tempts them into a kind of subjectivism about truth. But this confusion can be dispelled by pointing out that belief and truth are distinct concepts, and that what some person believes, and what is true, may be quite different things. To be sure, it's a tautology that to believe that p is to hold p true. Nevertheless, we understand that other people sometimes hold false beliefs; that we ourselves have held false beliefs in the past; and that in due course we may well discover that some of our present beliefs – although we can't, of course, presently say which – are false. And it obviously doesn't follow from the fact that in different cultures or at different times different propositions are believed to be true, that truth is culturally or temporally relative.

Many social or cultural institutions, roles, and rules – monarchy, money, monasteries, marching bands, etc. – are found in only some cultures, or in different forms in different societies; so claims about them are capable of truth or falsity only when completed by reference to a place and a time. For example, claims to the effect that the law is thus and so can be true or false only with respect to some legal system or systems – "the law of the land" – and to a time. "Novel scientific evidence is admissible only if it is generally accepted in the field to which it belongs" (the "*Frye* rule") is false in federal courts, where the requirement is that admissible expert testimony, including scientific testimony, be relevant and reliable; but it is true in state courts in Florida – or at least, it *was* true in state courts in Florida until 2001, when the Florida Supreme Court's ruling in *Ramirez* unclarified the situation.[11] Rather as "the front door is red" doesn't make it to true or false until a particular front door, and a time, are specified, "the law requires such-and-such" doesn't make it to true or false until a particular legal system, and a time, are specified; but once they're given, no further relativization is required. You might put this by saying that the truth of a legal claim is relative to a legal system and a time; but it obviously doesn't follow that truth itself is.[12]

Sometimes it is suggested that truth is relative, not to culture or community, but to theory.[13] Ordinarily, "*p* is true in theory T" means "according to theory T, it is true that *p*," i.e., "theory T implies that *p*"; which, like "true in the novel," poses no problem for my thesis. The issue is whether it makes sense to describe propositions as true or false without reference to any theory. I think it does. It is true-in-the-phlogiston-theory, for example, that phlogiston is given off during combustion; but the phlogiston theory is false, and so is the proposition that phlogiston is given off during combustion.

Some philosophers of science have had doubts about the appropriateness of describing scientific theories as true or false. Concerned that, if theoretical "statements" were really statements, they would have to be deemed empirically meaningless by the standards of the Verification Principle, the Instrumentalist wing of Logical Positivism maintained that theories are just intellectual instruments for deriving observational predictions. The newer manifestation of the instrumentalist impulse, constructive empiricism – even though it maintains that the goal of science is empirical adequacy, not truth – allows that theories are either true or false.[14] But the recently fashionable idea that theories are best construed as "models" is taken by some proponents as denying this.[15] *None* of these, however, entails that truth is theory-relative. And neither does the "meaning-variance thesis" proposed by Feyerabend and Kuhn; that theoretical and even observational terms may have different meanings in different theories, and one and the same sentence express different propositions, perhaps one true and the other false, so far from implying that the propositions expressed are not true, or false, period, implies that they are.[16]

Sometimes it is suggested that truth is relative, not to culture or community, not to theory or paradigm, but to conceptual scheme. In *Renewing Philosophy* Putnam writes that there are no descriptions of reality independent of perspective, and that it is impossible to divide our language into two parts, a part that describes how the world is anyway, and a part that describes our conceptual contribution. This, he tells us, "simply means that you can't describe the world without describing it"; nevertheless, he continues, it is a point of real philosophical impor-

tance, for it reveals that there can be many different descriptions of the world in many different vocabularies, all of them "*equally 'true'*."[17] This is quite a tangle; but since I have done my best to disentangle it elsewhere,[18] I hope you will forgive me if I'm brisk here. It's certainly true that you can't describe the world without describing it; in fact, it's a tautology. But it's certainly false that incompatible descriptions of the world can be both true; in fact, it's a contradiction. What is true and not tautologous is that there are many different but compatible truths, expressible in different vocabularies. But this is just the second of my themes, that there are many truths – which requires no relativization or fragmentation of the truth-concept.

Tarski's thesis that we need, not just the one truth-predicate, but a whole hierarchy of language-relative truth-predicates, suffers no such ambiguities as Putnam's "conceptual relativity"; and it is the conclusion of seemingly straightforward arguments in semantic theory.

There has been some confusion, however, about the relation of Tarski's semantic theory of truth to theories of the minimalist/deflationist/disquotationalist family. Tarski himself says that you might think of his theory as explicating Aristotle's dictum in a precise way which, unlike correspondence theories, requires no appeal to such notions as fact or correspondence – which in their traditional philosophical senses Tarski regards as irredeemably obscure;[19] so far, fair enough. Recently, however, Tarski is sometimes classified as a disquotationalist;[20] when in fact he holds that expressions within quotation marks are not semantically part of the expression as a whole.[21] More consequentially for present purposes, Tarski's T-schema has also been described as a paradigm of deflationism;[22] when in fact his approach differs very significantly from Ramsey's laconicism.[23]

Tarski proposes a Material Adequacy Condition which fixes the extension of the truth-predicate by requiring that any acceptable definition of truth have as consequences all instances of the T-schema, "S is true iff *p*" (where "S," on the left, names the sentence on the right). He emphasizes, however, that, though each instance constitutes a partial definition, the T-schema is not itself a definition of truth.[24] The definition Tarski gives, and then shows to be materially adequate,

applies not to propositions but to the closed wffs of certain formal languages; for unlike propositions, wffs have a definite syntactic structure, and Tarski's definition exploits this structure to get a grip on all the infinitely many wffs of the language. However, closed formulae may be constructed out of open formulae, which are not true or false, but rather satisfied, or not, by sequences of objects; so Tarski first gives a recursive definition of "satisfies," and then defines "true": "satisfied by all infinite sequences of objects."

Tarski's first argument for the relativity of truth to language derives from his choice of truth-bearer: one and the same string of symbols might be a sentence or wff in more than one language, true in one, but false or meaningless in the other. (As I explain to my students, "the department of philosophy at the University of Miami is on the seventh floor of the Ashe Building" is true-in-American-English, but false-in-British-English, which counts floors "ground, first, second, ...") A staunch proponent of propositions as the sole or primary truth-bearers would reply that Tarski's insistence on "true-in-L_1," "true-in-L_2," etc., is a mistake; what's needed is simply to acknowledge that "the philosophy department is on the 7th floor" expresses different propositions in the two languages – one true, and one false. I would put it another way: it isn't necssary to resort to "true-in-American-English" and "true-in-British-English"; it suffices to say that "the philosophy department is on the 7th floor," *qua* sentence of American English, is true, and "the philosophy department is on the 7th floor," *qua* sentence of British English, is false.

But Tarski's main argument for a hierarchy of truth-predicates derives from his solution to the Liar Paradox: distinguishing the object-language (the language *for* which truth is defined) from the meta-language (the language *in* which truth is defined), he requires that the metalinguistic predicate "true" be relativized to the object-language; and thus transmutes the offending sentence, "this sentence is false," into "this sentence is false-in-O" – which, since it is a sentence not of the object-language but of the meta-language, is not paradoxical but harmlessly false. So in his theory Liar-type paradoxes cannot even be expressed, and *a fortiori* cannot be derived as theorems. The reason semantic paradoxes arise in natural languages, Tarski suggests, is that these languages include unstratified concepts of

truth and falsity which can be applied to sentences of the language itself. Some critics, however, have felt that his diagnosis is too sweeping, and his cure too drastic. I agree, at least, that Tarski doesn't give us a really satisfying explanation of what goes wrong in that very specific, very small class of sentences that give rise to trouble, such as "this is true," "this is false," "this is not true"; and that his stratification of languages and corresponding multiplication of truth-concepts is at best artificial.

Tarski's (demonstrably materially adequate) definition of truth is undeniably an impressive technical achievement; but there is a peculiar doubleness about his approach that makes it less than satisfying philosophically. His definition applies to wffs of formally specifiable logical and mathematical languages, but not (so Tarski himself maintained, and I believe he was right) to the sentences of natural languages like Polish or English; and his response to the Liar is to devise a hierarchy of formal languages in which the paradoxical formulae are ill-formed. Insofar as Tarski has anything to say about the concept of truth in natural languages, he seems to suspect that it is irredeemable: "*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 seems to be very questionable*";[25] yet his project of defining truth for formal languages seems to make sense only against the background of the ordinary concept of truth, the concept we apply to sentences of natural languages, to people's beliefs, etc.

This doubleness comes to the surface in Tarski's reply to the objection that he hasn't given the "real meaning" of "true." He doesn't claim, he writes, that his is the "right" or the "only possible" conception of truth – whatever that means, he adds; he wouldn't be upset should some future world congress of truth-theorists vote to reserve "true" for other, non-classical, conceptions, and give him the word "frue" instead. But implicit in this apparently concessive response is the claim that his definition is (a modernized version of) the "classical conception"; moreover, Tarski immediately adds that he can't imagine how anyone could argue that the semantic conception is "wrong."[26] So he isn't claiming that the semantic conception is "right," but can't imagine how anyone could argue that it's "wrong"; hmmm.

Anyway, there are responses to the Liar which *don't* require fragmenting the truth-concept. Ramsey's solution – which he gave in the context, not of his discussions of truth, but of his proposed modification of Russell's Theory of Types – required stratification of propositions, but no multiplicity of truth-predicates.[27] A number of contemporary deflationists have adopted some form of the solution proposed by Kripke, which admits just one (albeit only partially defined) truth-predicate.[28] However, Ramsey's laconicism seems most hospitable to an approach which, instead of treating "true" and "false" as predicates expressing properties, treats them, as Ramsey says, as "prosentences" like "yes" and "no," functioning as placeholders for a proposition or propositions being indirectly affirmed or denied. This suggests that the reason the Truth-teller leaves the semantic wheels spinning idly is that there's nothing to be affirmed except that this is being affirmed; and the reason the Liar jams the semantic machinery is that there's nothing to be denied except what is being affirmed.[29]

Now let me turn to the considerations that have led some to think that there is *no* truth-concept, that the idea of truth is somehow illegitimate or misconceived – mostly, nowadays, very different from the considerations that pulled Tarski at least part-way to this conclusion. The fact that contemporary cynics often refuse even to use the word "true" without hedging it with precautionary scare quotes provides an important clue to what is going on.

The effect of scare quotes is to turn an expression meaning "X" into an expression meaning "supposed X, so-called 'X.'" So scarequotes "truths," as opposed to truths, are propositions, beliefs, etc., which are *taken to be* truths – many of which are not really truths at all. We humans, after all, are thoroughly fallible creatures: even with the best will in the world, finding out the truth can be hard work; and we are often willing, even eager, to *avoid* discovering, or to cover up, unpalatable truths. The rhetoric of truth, moreover, can be used in nefarious ways. Hence the idea that truth is nothing more than a rhetorical device for the promotion of claims that it would serve the interests of the powerful to have believed: the seductive but crashingly invalid argument I call the "Passes-for Fallacy."[30]

What passes for truth, the argument goes, is often no such thing, but only what the powerful have managed to get accepted as such; *therefore* the concept of truth is nothing but ideological humbug. The premiss is true; but, stated plainly, this argument is not only obviously invalid, but also in obvious danger of undermining itself. If, however, you don't distinguish truth from scare-quotes "truth," or truths from scare-quotes "truths," it can seem irresistible; which is partly why, despite its crashing invalidity, the Passes-for Fallacy now seems ubiquitous. The fallacy is encouraged by regimes of propaganda and, in our times, by an overwhelming flood of information, and misinformation, which promotes first credulity and then, as people realize they have been fooled, cynicism. For when it becomes notorious that what are presented as truths are not really truths at all – that *Pravda* is full of lies and propaganda, that the scientific breakthrough or miracle drug trumpeted in the press was no such thing – people become understandably distrustful of truth-claims, and increasingly reluctant to speak of truth without indicating their distrust by means of neutralizing quotation marks;[31] until they lose confidence in the very idea of truth, and those formerly precautionary scare quotes cease merely to warn and begin to sneer: "'Truth'? Yeah, right!"

Still, the Passes-for Fallacy isn't the only source of cynicism about truth; there is no shortage of philosophers armed with apparently more sophisticated arguments against the legitimacy of the concept. Rorty, for one, conducts a kind of guerilla warfare; disguising himself in a stained and tattered uniform apparently taken from a Davidsonian prisoner, he taunts the foot-soldiers of the analytic army – "you like arguments, right? OK: here you go!" – and lobs one confusing argumentative grenade after another. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* he avers that there are two senses of "true": "the homely and shopworn sense ... that Tarski and Davidson are attending to," in which "true" just means "what you can defend against all comers," and a "specifically philosophical sense ... designed precisely to stand for the Unconditioned." The second being clearly unacceptable, he suggests, we must accept the first; i.e., in effect, give up truth, and acknowledge only scare-quotes "truth." And in later writings, describing the intellectual history of the West as "an attempt to substitute a love of Truth for a love of God," Rorty avers: "I do not have much use for notions

like ... 'objective truth'." To call a statement true, he tells us, is just to give it a "rhetorical pat on the back"; "'true' [is] a word which applies to those beliefs upon which we are able to agree"; "[t]ruth is entirely a matter of solidarity."[32]

Of course, the suggestion that Tarski, or Davidson, thinks that truth is whatever you can defend against conversational objections is bizarre, and the supposed philosophical use of "true" is mysterious, to put it mildly; in any case, the dichotomy on which Rorty's argument by elimination rests is startlingly false. And his proposed reduction of truth to here-and-now agreement – apparently the result of stripping Peirce's definition of truth, as the Final Opinion on which inquirers would agree were scientific inquiry to continue indefinitely, of everything that anchors it to the world – clearly won't do. Yes, sometimes "true" is used as an expression of agreement; yes, to say that we agree that *p* is to say that we agree that *p* is true. But we may agree that *p* when *p* is *not* true, and we may not agree that *p* when *p is* true.

The proposed demotion of "true" to a mere rhetorical device – apparently a nod to Ramsey, misconstrued as urging that "true" is redundant save for its rhetorical usefulness – is no better. "True" is, indeed, rhetorically useful; but its rhetorical usefulness depends on its having the semantic role it does. Certainly *Pravda* was called *Pravda* (as the University of Miami newspaper is called *Veritas*) for propaganda purposes; but the names wouldn't serve those propaganda purposes so well if "*pravda*" and "*veritas*" were *mere* expressions of approval, like "huzzah!" or "yippedydoodah!"[33] As for Rorty's hints that concern for truth is a kind of superstition, and his boast that truth isn't something about which *he* gives a damn, Peirce long ago made the appropriate response: "You certainly agree that there is such a thing as Truth. Otherwise, reasoning and thought would be without a purpose. ... Every man is fully satisfied that there is such a thing as truth, or he would not ask any question."[34]

As my earlier allusions to instrumentalism, constructivism, and "modelism" in philosophy of science revealed, even among those who are "fully satisfied that there is such a thing as truth," some doubt that the concept is of any relevance to understanding science. I disagree: "sci-

ence," as I understand it, refers to a loose federation of kinds of in-
quiry; and the goal of inquiry is to discover true answers to the ques-
tions into which you are inquiring. Were the point crucial to the ar-
gument of this paper, I would need to add that this is not to say that
scientists seek THE TRUTH, as distinct from true answers to their
questions, and neither is it to deny that scientists very often, and rea-
sonably, claim only that their answers are probably, or possibly, true;
but since these issues aren't essential here, I will set them aside.[35]

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Now let me turn – much more briefly, you will be relieved to hear – to
the arguments against a plurality of truths.

If there were no legitimate truth-concept, there would *a fortiori* be
no genuine, bona fide truths. But then, as Peirce says, reasoning really
would be without a purpose; for inquiry, assertion, belief, argument,
question-and-answer, etc., are all intimately dependent on the con-
cept of truth. This is why Rorty is reduced to reducing inquiry to "car-
rying on the conversation," and justified belief to "whatever can over-
come all conversational objections," and to dismissing four hundred
years of successful scientific investigation as just "a model of human
solidarity." But it is also why, in asserting that to call a statement true
is just to give it a rhetorical pat on the back, he undermines what he
asserts; for to assert that p – which Peirce likens to swearing an affida-
vit or taking an oath that p[36] – is precisely to commit yourself (not to
the scare-quotes "truth," but) to the truth of p.

F. H. Bradley doesn't deny the legitimacy of the truth-concept; but
he holds that "truth is ... always imperfect." Every judgment is "condi-
tional," he writes, meaning that it is incomplete, expressing less than
the whole truth; there can be no truth which is entirely true, he con-
tinues, and no error which is entirely false, i.e., contains no grain of
truth: "[o]ur judgements ... can never reach as far as perfect truth, and
must be content merely to enjoy more or less of *Validity*." However, "*p*
is only part of the truth" doesn't imply "*p* is only partially true." This
point seems sometimes to elude historians, who – observing, correctly,
that any account of a past event will inevitably omit or play down
some aspects while it includes or highlights others – are tempted to

conclude that no historical account can be true, but at best scare-quotes "true." A straightforward acknowledgment of incompleteness and selectivity would be preferable.

In my initial statement of my thesis I said that there are "many *and various* propositions that are true"; and I meant it. But there have been many who have held that all real truths, or perhaps all ultimate truths, are of just one kind. The idea that the world of appearances is mere illusion, and an ideal or spiritual realm the real reality, has been a re-curring theme in the history of philosophy, and of the world religions: from Plato's claim that the Forms are really real, with sensible particu-lars hovering somewhere "between being and non-being," to religious conceptions of this world as illusory, the next world as truly real, or of a holy text as the source of all real truths. In our times, however, the tables have been turned by ambitious scientific reductionists maintain-ing that all truths can be derived from scientific laws, and ultimately from the laws of physics. These days, religious believers are more likely to feel the need to argue, defensively, not that theirs is the only real truth there is, but that there really are spiritual, as well as scientific, truths.

Fortunately perhaps, it is hardly feasible for me to undertake a comprehensive discussion of reductionism here. But I will venture to say that, in view of their large historical element, it seems very doubt-ful even that the biological sciences are wholly reducible to physics; and that – despite the significant parallels between human beings' social behavior and that of other animals, and despite the undeniable biological constraints on our social interactions – it also seems very doubtful that the intentional social sciences are wholly reducible to biology. For the intentional social sciences appeal to people's beliefs, hopes, etc.; and though these are neurophysiologically realized, the relevant families of neurophysiological configurations have to be iden-tified, not by their neurophysiological characteristics, but by reference to patterns of verbal behavior in a person's linguistic community, to denotation and meaning, and to the things in the world that those beliefs, etc., are about.

This isn't to say, and I don't believe, that there is non-physical mind- or soul-stuff; it's all physical, all right, even if it isn't all physics. Neither is it to say, and I don't believe either, that the intentional social sciences are wholly disjoint from the natural sciences. The social sciences, though not reducible to the natural sciences, are integrated with them – rather as a map which represents the roads, towns, etc., can be superimposed on a delineation of the contours of the same territory, and integrated with it in virtue of the fact that the roads go around the lake and through the pass in the mountains, that the town is on, not in, the river, and so forth. The natural sciences draw the contour map of the biological roots of human nature and the biological constraints on human culture; the social sciences superimpose a road map of marriage customs in New Guinea, the failures of the Soviet economy, the rise of modern science in seventeenth-century Europe, etc., etc.

This doesn't yet speak to the question of the relation of the sciences to inquiry more generally. I don't believe the sciences are the only sources of truth, or the only legitimate kinds of inquiry; nor do I believe the sciences can explain everything. There are many scientific questions as yet unanswered, not to mention those that can't as yet even be asked; and there are many questions (legal and literary, culinary and commercial, ethical and epistemological, ..., etc., etc.) beyond the scope of the sciences. However, it doesn't follow that there are sources of knowledge over and above what Peirce called the "method of experience and reasoning" – the method of everyday empirical inquiries into the causes of delayed buses and spoiled food, and the method refined and amplified by the sciences in a host of local and evolving special methodologies and techniques. Asking, "Can science explain everything?" in the challenging tone of a question-expecting-the-answer-"no," religious believers sometimes suggest that a negative answer clinches the matter. But obviously it *doesn't* clinch the matter; and I for one am skeptical of supernatural explanations, and of the supposed deliverances of "religious experience" – as I am of the supposed special "ways of knowing" sometimes claimed for women, or Native Americans, or, etc.[37]

There are truths of many kinds; but not of any and every kind anyone has ever imagined. And of course there aren't rival, incompatible truths or "knowledges." As the title of Pope John Paul II's 1996 address acknowledging the theory of evolution as "more than a hypothesis" puts it: "Truth Cannot Contradict Truth."[38] However, it isn't always easy to know whether this claim and that are compatible; even formal consistency or inconsistency may not be easy to determine, and compatibility or incompatibility, depending also on subtleties of meaning, is apt to be harder yet. We humans are susceptible to both ignorance and error, on both empirical questions and logical. This doesn't mean that there are really no truths, or that it's not possible to discover some of them; it does mean that we had better be willing to revise what we believe should the evidence turn out against it.

If A believes that p, and B believes that not-p, one of them must be mistaken.[39] Though this is a tautology, some apparently find it unacceptably harsh. Perhaps they feel it is a breach of civility, disrespectful even, to suggest that those who disagree with you are mistaken;[40] perhaps they hope that concepts of etiquette, like politeness, collegiality, etc., could stand in for logical or epistemological concepts. No doubt they are motivated by a kindly tolerance and open-mindedness; but the interrelations of the concepts of respect and disagreement are far subtler than they acknowledge, and the hope that "discourse ethics" will suffice to serve our epistemological needs is vain. The issues here are very complex; but I shall have to confine myself to a couple of rather simple paragraphs.

First: If I have reason to respect your intelligence, and you disagree with me about whether p, I should think again; maybe I'm mistaken, confused, or missing something. On the other hand, if I discover that you believe something silly, this will lower my opinion of you; and if it's something *really* silly (and I have no reason to think you are trapped in a pocket of misleading evidence) I may lose my respect for your intelligence, or perhaps for your integrity. Of course, I may be wrong in thinking that what you believe is silly; and, even more importantly from a practical point of view, even if I'm right this doesn't entitle me to lock you up, burn down your house of worship, or indoctrinate you or your children with beliefs I think more reasonable.

Second: Successful inquiry often requires cooperation, and often depends crucially on communication among individuals; but the epistemologically desirable kind of communication isn't a matter merely of following the norms of good conversational conduct, as those norms are ordinarily understood. Donald McCloskey writes of listening, of paying attention, of not raising one's voice.[41] But as Francis Crick observed of his working relationship with James Watson, successful collaboration requires that "you must be very candid, one might almost say rude, to the person you are working with"; if "politeness creeps in ... this is the end of good collaboration in science."[42] This unwillingness to waste time and energy making nice, is, indeed, a mark of respect for each other's seriousness as an investigator.

The argument here has been not only quite long, but also quite complex and wide-ranging. But the conclusions are simple enough: there is one truth, but many truths; truth is objective, but our efforts to discover truths about the world are fallible. How hard was that?[43]

Keywords
Truth, laconicism, relativism, Ramsey, Tarski, Rorty.

Susan Haack
Department of Philosophy
University of Miami
Coral Gables, Florida, 33124, USA

Resumo

Há uma verdade, mas muitas verdades, isto é, um conceito de verdade não-ambíguo e não-relativo, mas muitas e diferentes proposições que são verdadeira. Um conceito de verdade: dizer que uma proposição é verdadeira é dizer (não que qualquer um, ou todos, acreditam nela, mas) que as coisas são como ela diz. Mas muitas verdades: alegações empíricas e

particulares, teorias científicas, proposições históricas, teoremas da matemática, princípios lógicos, interpretações de textos, enunciados sobre o que uma pessoa quer, ou em que acredita, ou pretende, sobre regras gramaticais e legais, etc., etc. Mas, como Frank Ramsey disse uma vez: "Não há nenhuma obviedade tão óbvia que não tenha sido negada por filósofos famosos"; e tão logo perguntaríamos por que alguém negaria que há um conceito de verdade, ou que há diversas proposições verdadeiras, torn-se evidente que minha fórmula inicial e simples esconde muitas complexidades.

Palavras-chave

Verdade, laconismo, relativismo, Ramsey, Tarski, Rorty.

Notes

[1] Cooper Senior Scholar in Arts and Sciences, Professor of Philosophy, and Professor of Law, University of Miami.

[2] Sigmund Freud, "A *Weltanschauung*," *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalyis* (1933). My source is John Gross, *The Oxford Book of Aphorisms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 227. I tackled the question of whether truth comes in degrees in "Is Truth Flat or Bumpy?" (1980), reprinted in Susan Haack, *Deviant Logic, Fuzzy Logic: Beyond the Formalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 243–58, but I won't return to it here.

[3] Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (c.1600), Act I, Scene 3, lines 78–80.

[4] F. P. Ramsey, *On Truth*, eds. Nicholas Rescher and Ulrich Majer (Dordrecht, the Netherlands: Kluwer, 1992), p. 12.

[5] Aristotle, *Metaphysics* (trans. Christopher Kirwan, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), Book Gamma, Chapter 7, 1011b2.

[6] Ramsey, *On Truth* (note 4 above): the quotations come, in order of appearance, from pp. 11–12, xviii n. 5, and 9.

[7] The label seemed appropriate enough when only Ramsey's "Facts and Propositions" (1927), in *The Foundations of Mathematics,* ed. R. B. Braithwaite (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1931), 138–55, was available; I used it myself in *Philosophy of Logics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), chapter 7. But since Ramsey's manuscripts of 1927–9 were published in 1992 (*On Truth*, note 4 above), it has become apparent that the term is misleading.

[8] This poses significant difficulties: on an objectual interpretation of the quantifiers, sentential variables stand in for names of sentences, and Ramsey's analysis of "everything he says is true," viz., "for all p, if he says that p, then p," would amount to "for all p, if he says that p, then 'p' is true"; while on a substitutional interpretation it would amount to "every substitution-instance of 'if he asserts that p, then p' is true." But in "The Logical Enquiry into Truth," *History and Philosophy of Logic* 17 (1996): 179–97, María-José Frápolli proposes an account of sentential quantifiers (based on ideas from Arthur Prior and C. J. F. Williams) as disguised inference rules – on which it would amount to: "you may infer every instance of 'if he asserts p, then p'" – which seems to avoid the difficulty.

[9] As Ramsey acknowledges: *On Truth* (note 4 above) p. 6.

[10] George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (1876; Harmondsworth, Middlesex, U. K.: Penguin Books), 1987. At the beginning of chapter 21 (p. 268), Eliot interrupts her narrative with an extraordinarily powerful paragraph on the damage ignorance can wreak.

[11] *Ramirez v. State*, 8120 So. 2d 836 (Fla. 2001): while officially reaffirming Florida's adherence to *Frye*, the Florida Supreme Court screened for reliability *as an indication of general acceptance* (!).

[12] See also Susan Haack, "Truth, Truths, 'Truth,' and 'Truths' in the Law," *Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy*, 26.1 (2003): 17–21, and re-"printed" electronically in *The Journal of Philosophy, Science, and Law* (2003).

[13] Or perhaps paradigm; but I shan't discuss this variant specifically, since it seems to be covered either by the discussion of the supposed relativity of truth to theory, or by the discussion of the supposed relativity of truth to conceptual scheme (below).

[14] On scientific realism vs. instrumentalism, constructive empiricism, etc., see also Susan Haack, *Defending Science – Within Reason: Between Scientism and Cynicism* (Amherst, N. Y.: Prometheus Books, 2003), pp.124–46.

[15] See for example Ronald Giere, *Science Without Laws* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); and the discussion in my *Defending Science – Within Reason* (note 14 above), pp.138–9.

[16] On "meaning-variance" (and its many meanings) see Susan Haack, "'Realism'," *Synthese*, 73.2, 1989: 275–98.

[17] Hilary Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 122–3.

[18] Susan Haack, "Reflections on Relativism: From Momentous Tautology to Seductive Contradiction" (1996), reprinted in Haack, *Manifesto of a Passion-*

ate Moderate: Unfashionable Essays (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 149–66.

[19] Alfred Tarski, "The Semantic Concept of Truth" (1944), in *Readings in Philosophical Analysis*, eds. Herbert Feigl and Wilfrid Sellars (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1949), 52–84, pp. 53–4 and 69–70.

[20] As, for example, W. V. Quine seems to suggest in *Quiddities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 213.

[21] 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, pp. 159ff.

[22] Scott Soames, *Understanding Truth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 238.

[23] In "The Semantic Concept of Truth" (note 19 above), pp. 68–70, Tarski replies to the anticipated objection that "true" is redundant (he does not, however, mention Ramsey specifically). Nevertheless, Rescher and Majer, the editors of Ramsey's papers *On Truth* (note 4 above) – besides continuing to characterize Ramsey's approach as the redundancy theory (p. xvii) – describe Ramsey as having come remarkably close to anticipating Tarski (p. xvi).

[24] Tarski, "The Semantic Concept of Truth" (note 19 above), p. 55.

[25] Tarski, "The Concept of Truth in Formalized Languages" (note 21 above), p. 165.

[26] Tarski, "The Semantic Conception of Truth" (note 19 above), pp. 65–6.

[27] F. P. Ramsey, "The Foundations of Mathematics" in *The Foundations of Mathematics* (note 7 above), 1–61, p. 48.

[28] Saul Kripke, "Outline of a Theory of Truth," *Journal of Philosophy*, 72, 1975: 698–716; reprinted in Robert L. Martin, *Recent Essays on Truth and the Liar Paradox* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 53–83. Kripke relies in part on the concept of groundedness introduced by Hans Herzberger in "Paradoxes of Grounding in Semantics," *Journal of Philosophy*, 17, 1976, 145–67. Scott Soames, *Understanding Truth* (note 22 above), 163–200; Hartry Field, "A Revenge-Immune Solution to the Semantic Paradoxes," *Journal of Philosophical Logic*, 32.2, 2003: 139–77.

[29] The approach to which I gesture metaphorically here has some affinity with the account elaborated in detail by Dorothy Grover in *A Prosentential Theory of Truth* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 121–36. (Like Kripke, Grover uses Herzberger's concept of groundedness; but, unlike Kripke, she construes "true" as a prosentence rather than a predicate repre-

senting a property.) From a laconicist perspective, I note, the Strengthened Liar looks less like something inherently more threatening than the simple Liar than a rather trivial variant of it.

[30] I first introduced the term in "Knowledge and Propaganda: Reflections of an Old Feminist" (1993), reprinted in Haack, *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate* (note 18 above), 123–36. See also my "Staying for an answer: the untidy process of groping for truth," *Times Literary Supplement*, July 9th, 1999, 12–14. The *locus classicus* on the deceptive power of scare quotes is David Stove, *Popper and After: Four Modern Irrationalists* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1982), reprinted under the title *Anything Goes: Origins of the Cult of Scientific Irrationalism* (Paddington, Australia: Macleay Press, 1998), chapter 1.

[31] The day I wrote this paragraph, a headline in the *Wall Street Journal* referred to "The Politics of Peru's 'Truth' Commission" (September 5th, 2003, A9), nicely illustrating the point about scare quotes.

[32] The quotations come, in order of appearance, from: Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 308–9; *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 22; "Trotsky and the Wild Orchids," *Common Knowledge*, 3.1, 1992: 140–53, p. 141; *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Hassocks, Sussex, U. K., 1982), p. xvii; "Science as Solidarity," in John S. Nelson, Allan Megill, and Donald N. McCloskey, eds., *The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 38–52, p. 43; *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 32.

[33] See also Susan Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry: Towards Reconstruction in Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), pp. 183–94; and "Confessions of an Old-Fashioned Prig," in *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate* (note 18 above), pp. 18–21.

[34] C. S. Peirce, *Collected Papers*, eds. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss, and Arthur Burks (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931–58), 2.138 and 5.211 (references are by volume and paragraph number).

[35] But see Susan Haack, *Defending Science – Within Reason* (note 14 above), chapter 5.

[36] Peirce, *Collected Papers* (note 34 above), 2.252.

[37] See also Susan Haack, *Defending Science – Within Reason* (note 14 above) pp. 154–61 (on the relation of the social to the natural sciences), 96–8 (on the continuity of scientific with everyday empirical inquiry, and 265–89 (on religious experience, supernatural explanations, etc.); and "Fallibilism and

Faith, Naturalism and the Supernatural, Science and Religion," in *Dio, la Natura e la Legge*, eds. Stefano Moriggi and Elio Sindoni (Milan: Angelicum-Mondo X, 2005), 143–54.

[38] Pope John Paul II, "Message on Evolution to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences," *Acta Apostolica Sedis* 88 (1996). After writing this I discovered in Peter J. King's *One Hundred Philosophers: The Life and Works of the World's Greatest Thinkers* (London: Quarto; New York: Barrons, 2004), the following quotation from Islamic philosopher Ibn Rushd (1126–1198): "truth does not oppose truth" (p. 62).

[39] I stress that the point is that one of them must *be mistaken*. Possibly one might want to say that neither has necessarily *made a mistake*, in the sense of having an unjustified belief; or that neither need be morally to blame. (On the latter point, see Haack, "'The Ethics of Belief' reconsidered," in Lewis Hahn, ed., *The Philosophy of R. M. Chisholm* (La Salle, Il.: Open Court, The Library of Living Philosophers, vol. 25, 1997), 129–44.) But these are different issues.

[40] A curious phenomenon, this, explored in more detail in Jonathan Rauch, *Kindly Inquisitors: The New Attacks on Free Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

[41] Donald N. McCloskey, *Knowledge and Persuasion in Economics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 99ff.

[42] Francis Crick, *What Mad Pursuit: A Personal View of Scientific Discovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), p. 13.

[43] My thanks to Mark Migotti for detailed comments on a draft and to Franca D'Agostini for relevant correspondence. My thanks, also, to Kiriake Xerohemona, not only for "laconicism," and for bibliographical help, but also for our many discussions of Tarski, Ramsey, the Liar, etc., which prompted me to think through some of the issues here; and to María-José Frápolli for our discussions, some years ago now, of prosententialism, propositional quantifiers, etc.