

Marek Hetmański
Faculty of Philosophy and Sociology
Marie Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin

Why Truth Still Matters in Science and Philosophy?

Truth is the problem which constantly concentrates the interest of both philosophers and scientists. Even if not of every science – taking into account a few of them as mathematics, physics as well as sociology and psychology – tackles the truth in the same way, it is only philosophy which makes this issue the recurrent subject of its interest. But the issue of truth has its different forms of manifestation and depends on the theoretical context which makes it more or less arguable and convincing. There are general aspects of truth *per se*, namely, the criteria of its adequacy or its normative versus descriptive character, as well as more particular issues concerning its linguistic entanglement or criteria of credibility of the agents who assert and convey the true statements. Apart from the epistemic aspect, there is also the ontological (metaphysical) dimension of truth, namely, what kinds of ontological positions – realism or anti-realism – guarantee its epistemological validity. All of these aspects are presented in the current four papers which have been delivered during the seminar organized at the Institute of Philosophy, Marie-Curie Skłodowska University, last year (on May 29th). They are offered for the reader now as Maria J. Frápolli's introductory paper with the seminal question “what does it mean that science seeks the truth?” and three others referring more or less directly to her pragmatic account.

The questions and the answers one can find in the papers are formulated, as I want to mention hereby, in a very general pragmatic attitude. All of them start with the assumption that truth is the matter of different inquiries made in science as well as in other types of cognitive undertakings. Obviously, these inquiries as “aiming at the truth” are mostly evident and active in science becoming the standards for many other human cognitive, both individual and group undertakings. What the pragmatic account emphasizes most is the fact that truth as epistemic value emerges from the core of the inquiries; the inquiries, respectively to their structures and forms, call into being their standards. It means that truth as epistemic value is not the external item. As an intrinsic value it is also concrete norm understood as the set of rules used in the conduct of inquiry. Truth as obviousness is then the crucial item that emerges throughout perpetual human evaluative and normative undertakings which are prior to the generalized norms themselves. The practical norms are therefore a cultural and

social embodiment of individual and group experience which people acquire while trying to experience numerous things. This can be observed not only in science, where truth plays the crucial role, but also in the areas of commonsensical knowledge or public opinion, in the manifold of communicational behaviors. Everywhere the “aiming at truth” and “truth oriented inquiries” take the form of different activities from logical inferences through empirical investigations to judging in the public and political sphere. In all of them the main purpose of inquiry is to reduce, as Charles S. Peirce stated, the agent’s doubt and go to “not merely opinion, but a true opinion”.

The Peircean conception of “fixation of belief” as an aim of inquiry has been widely adopted and developed in the current version of neo-pragmatism, especially by Susan Haack who says: “The goal of inquiry is substantial, significant, illuminating truth; the concept of justification is specifically focused on security; on the likelihood of beliefs being true” (Haack 2009, 263). This concept of truth satisfies the Aristotelian circumstances of forming a true judgment as corresponding to the facts. As truth is what people generally aim at while performing most of their cognitive activities, including the most important – scientific inquiries – the criteria of epistemological justification of their beliefs and judgments (mostly scientific theories) are “truth-indicative”, as neo-pragmatists usually say. This general epistemological assumption is, I believe, accepted by all the authors of the following papers since they have elaborated on their own this idea in very distinct ways.

* * *

Maria J. Frápolli argues in her paper titled *No Miracles* that the old debate between anti-realism and realism (in her articulation – between metaphysical realism and default realism), which she strongly argues, is both – for the historical reasons – unavoidable and – for the epistemological ones – questionable. Especially the anti-realist position creates the apparent vision, the false one, of losing Paradise where the discourse about truth and objectivity is forbidden. “My purpose – Frápolli ironically admits – is to argue for our right to rest in the realist’s paradise without being entangled in its dark aspects”. The metaphysical nature of such debate makes it useless in the areas outside of philosophy where the relations between knowledge and reality are debated too but do not follow to the extreme results. The main aim of the paper is to “disentangle the analysis of the (standard, robust, ordinary but also scientific) notion of truth from the debate between realism and anti-realism”, and this task is undertaken in the frame of Fregean semantics and Quinean ontology. As the “meaning of truth is a semantic issue”, the problem of its criteria depends on the type of acts and the kinds of content in which the truth manifests itself in different scientific undertakings. In order to explain this semantic-pragmatic nature of truth Frápolli admits that “truth” is an abstract name that doesn’t work referentially; “seeking the truth”, as most epistemologists confess, is not the same as “seeking

the TV remote control". The existence of the possible objects to which the "truth", as the higher-order notion, could refer is a complicated matter because existence is also a higher-order notion. One can state what are the causal links between abstract notion and its object only in the frame of the particular kind of discourse.

In her argumentation Frápolli uses the so called No-Miracle Argument (stated previously by Hilary Putnam and endorsed by Susan Haack) which says, in a very crude way, that realism supports epistemological view "that doesn't make the success of science a miracle". It means that there is no need to be a metaphysical realist (who claims that for the theories to be true they have to be causally connected with the world) because it's enough to be a naturalist (in the non-reductionist version). Naturalist claims that people don't make up the world, because belonging to it, they are just constrained by it in their cognitive undertakings including the search for the truth. For Frápolli naturalism is an extension of default realism.

Each truth ascription (i.e. a sentence by means of which "truth is put to work") has either of singular or general nature depending on the content which such ascription has. But there are the sentences (utterances) which haven't even the minimal information about the content; their truth-value depends then on the context in which they are stated and function. Frápolli admits that there are in natural languages some sentences – she calls them "pro-sentences", working as propositional variables – which aren't truth ascriptions. They play, nevertheless, a crucial role in human conceptual systems helping in expression of general thoughts. She asks also what is the communicative intention of an agent who utters the sentence: "Science seeks the truth"? Making this important remark on the intention – considered probably from the epistemological, not only epistemic, level – she nevertheless doesn't follow her remarkable question in this direction. The discourse is held consequently at the logical, neither epistemological nor psychological level. She says only that in the context of different scientific disciplines this sentence would be reworded into another general sentence: "If *something* is true, sciences should seek to establish (discover, explain) *it*". Both of them (being mutual reformulations) possess the general content and concern the facts, the infinite instances from different areas of knowledge. What a pity, I would like to mention, that a more detailed, historical or social examples aren't considered here.

Frápolli at the end of her paper considers the debate about the representationalism. This philosophical view is the semantic side of the metaphysical realism which has some limitations bringing about a lot of objections. Using metaphorical way (derived from H. Price's critical comments on "representationalist game") of defining this philosophical perspective, one can say that the idea to put (as the representationalist's metaphor entails) the stickers (i.e. words or sentences) to the shapes (i.e. world, facts) is somehow tricky and not the true picture of human ways of representing the world. Representationalism is correct only for elementary sentences but fails as regards the more abstract sentences; the sentence "what he says is true" cannot depict any particular state-of-affairs.

Concluding her analyses of the types of truth ascriptions and their truth conditions, Frápolli argues that the claims such as “the truth is the aim of science” or “science seeks the truth” have the “logico-semantic structure of generalizations over propositions”. She also claims that in asserting the general content of these sentences “we don’t need to adhere to any particular metaphysical position” while announcing the sentences with the particular contents (i.e. “if p , then sciences should establish that p (for all p)”) one might take any philosophical position – metaphysical realist, anti-realist or inferentialist. In other words, only if we (as scientists not ordinary people) use the truth as a higher-order notion (what follows from the semantic hypothesis) then we should “assume the best-tasted results brought out by the relevant scientific communities”. What communities and what results of their epistemic endeavors are meant here, Frápolli does not explain. And this is a crucial issue worth of both mentioning and critical elaborating.

* * *

Paweł Kawalec asks the very crucial question about Maria Frápolli’s position in the truth debate, namely, the viability of her pragmatic account of scientific truth which he wants to assess in the context of mixed-methods research program. Noticing that pragmatic account fits well with the pragmatic justification of the mixed-methods approach, he advocates in the paper, nonetheless, that this approach “may not be able to significantly contribute to resolve the issue of the rules of meta-inferences generating the results of mixed-methods research”. Why? The very reasonable view in the truth-debate is to start with the claim (approved by the all pragmatists) that although there are multiple truths, truth is unique and that the notion of truth acquires different features and contents depending on the kind of discipline of knowledge to which it applies. The pragmatic account has nevertheless exposed itself to the danger of presenting the evident falsehood as true in virtue of – as pragmatists assume – its acceptance. To avoid such methodological ambiguity one should consider more complex and sensitive methodology. The historical cases of cholera research in the XIX century, elaborated in the frame of the mixed-methods approach, would be helpful in exercising the pragmatic conception of truth. The author remarks that Frápolli’s argumentation assumes a linear process of cognition and knowledge acquisition leading thus to a unique assertion of a tentative scientific truth. He seems to challenge this idea in the light of “a moderately pluralistic view of the research process which allows for cross-validation which precedes the assertion of scientific truth”. The fruitfulness of such research program lies in the fact it enables scientific community to avoid any counterintuitive results which pragmatic account would produce. Especially, a form of cross-validation of alternative assertions, depending on using the delimitating counterfactual reasoning, would be useful for a pragmatic account.

* * *

Andrzej Nowakowski in his paper *Realism, Anti-Realism and Truth* argues that semantics does not provide any successful arguments or instruments to solve the metaphysical debates, especially these which are between realism and anti-realism. He admits that both positions are found in deliberately and sophisticatedly constructed philosophical, religious, scientific as well as pseudoscientific theories in which the same question arises – are proposed conceptions and theories true or false? The attempts to answer such question entail the other one, namely how do exist the entities of the true and/or false sentences, ascriptions – which is metaphysical in nature. He intends to investigate the relationship between metaphysical realism and anti-realism as well as between semantic realism and anti-realism. In order to do this he starts with Frege's suggestion that sentences pertaining to things that do not exist at all are neither true nor false. Thanks to such assumption he states that "the relation between metaphysical and semantic realism and anti-realism becomes apparent" what makes the gap between metaphysics and semantics constantly far from bridging. Similarly the question of justification of true sentences is still disputed and also remains without any reasonable conclusions. The same happens to the attempts of understanding what is "true" on the grounds of subjectivity; all these attempts end with their own different and separate "semantic postulates". As these postulates are relative and deliberately stated, they do not entail any acceptable conclusions. "And so – Nowakowski remarks – while trying to arrive at metaphysics *via* semantics, one becomes a mystic". Appeal to Wittgensteinian case is very appropriate here, as I would like to mention.

* * *

Katarzyna Gurczyńska-Sady argues that both philosophical and scientific concept of objective truth is actually empty and serves at least as a type of a white lie. It's the myth but nevertheless a useful one in many areas of theoretical experience, especially in philosophy. As regards the issue discussed here – does science (as well as scientists) seek the truth? – she believes that before answering this "classical question" one should rather ask the more general one, namely, "whether the truth concerning reality is one, or are there more truths?" as well as "is the truth something to find and gain once for ever, or it is something to invent and then give it up going to the next one?". Gurczyńska-Sady answers positively the second parts of the above questions following the tradition of European philosophy stemming from Nietzsche's, Gadamer's and Derrida's influence; she accepts their theories that the truth is functioning only in plural. Perspectivism recognized by hermeneutics, mainly by Hans-Georg Gadamer, rejects the vision of human mind as a mirror of the world. It opened a new vision both of the knowing agent and the

known object. The reality turned out to be an interpretation, not simply representation; the existence of the realm of signs, meanings, and symbols which are the objects of an interpretation. It, consequently, led also to the option of there being many truths and not the only one.

Special interest is given by the author to Ludwik Fleck's conception of collective thought and style of thinking which can be treated as his distinct (rather than rare in his times when neo-positivistic tradition was very influential) attempt to look at the truth-problem from the socio-cultural perspective. Fleck considers human thinking as belonging not to the pure philosophical "self", but is determined by the community which the human agent belongs to. In fact, the subject of cognition and knowledge is not an individual but a collective one. The community called the "thought collective" is a group of individuals coping mostly with the particular problems in which the language – either of some scientific discipline or common language deeply rooted in a particular culture – determines the thought and its nature. As these problems and their linguistic grasping are much differentiated and change due to the historical context, seeing, cognition, thinking are stylish in their substance. Scientists as well others (as artists or laymen) who try to define, name or make a picture of the problem they cope with are in the same position – they create different world-pictures. Gurczyńska-Sady, following not only Fleck but also Wittgenstein's concept of "seeing as", remarks that any (at least) two observers, spectators or scientists, belonging to different thought-styles and cultures, haven't common ground or content in their world-pictures; their pictures are too much stylish to be similar or common. They never come consequently to an agreement in such delicate problem as truth. Even if they don't have any serious epistemological premises in believing in objective picture of the world, they might nevertheless believe in endeavors after the truth. Gurczyńska-Sady concludes her paper saying (addressing it directly to Frápolli's introductory question) that "the answer to the question of whether scientists seek the truth – even if we agree that there is no objective truth – paradoxically is positive!". The paradox is apparent if one agrees that what scientists actually find in their culturally rooted undertakings is "true" only within their stylish cognition. Believing in obtaining objective knowledge is an illusion but unavoidable one because there is the special agent's cultural obligation ("interest of this process" – the author concludes) to believe that there is the truth in the gain of science and the agent "should" think truly about it.

References

- Haack S., 2009, *Evidence and Inquiry. A pragmatist Reconstruction of Epistemology*, New York: Prometheus Books.