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“There is no truth.” What could that mean? Why should anybody say it?

Actually, almost nobody (except Wallace Stevens) does say it.¹ But philosophers like me are often said to say it. One can see why. For we have learned (from Nietzsche and James, among others) to be suspicious of the appearance–reality distinction. We think that there are many ways to talk about what is going on, and that none of them gets closer to the way things are in themselves than any other. We have no idea what “in itself” is supposed to mean in the phrase “reality as it is in itself.” So we suggest that the appearance–reality distinction be dropped in favor of a distinction between less useful and more useful ways of talking. But since most people think that truth is correspondence to the way reality “really is,” they think of us as denying the existence of truth.

Our critics – the philosophers who agree that that is indeed what truth is – do not think that the useful–useless distinction can take the place of the old appearance–reality distinction. They believe that less useful ways of talking are descriptions of what only appears to be going on, whereas more useful ones are descriptions of what is really going on. For example: primitive scientists, or conformist members of a slaveholding society, describe what misleadingly appears to be going on. Modern physicists, like believers in universal human rights, know what is really going on. Our critics need the reality–appearance distinction to prevent the notion of “corresponding to reality” from being trivialized. For every belief, no matter how primitive or

¹ "It was when I said, / ‘There is no such thing as the truth,’ / That the grapes seemed fatter, / The fox ran out of his hole" (Wallace Stevens, “On the Road Home,” in The Collected Poems [New York: Vintage, 1990], 203).
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vicious, corresponds to some “world” – the “world” that contains the objects mentioned by the belief (Ptolemy’s crystalline spheres or the subhuman nature of the slaves). So those who want to hang on to the notion of “correspondence” have to take the idea of how things really are seriously.

The essays in this volume argue that philosophy will get along better without the notions of “the intrinsic nature of reality” and “correspondence to reality” than with them. For those who find these notions indispensable, but only for them, this will look like an argument that there is no truth. When I protest that my pragmatist views still allow me to call some statements “true” and others “false,” and to argue for so calling them, my critics tell me that that is not good enough. For, they explain, I have drained all the meaning out of the terms “true” and “false.” I have left us without “substantive,” and with merely “aesthetic” or “relativist,” senses of these terms. This charge of “relativism” is hard to shake off.

Truth is, to be sure, an absolute notion, in the following sense: “true for me but not for you” and “true in my culture but not in yours” are weird, pointless locutions. So is “true then, but not now.” Whereas we often say “good for this purpose, but not for that” and “right in this situation, but not in that,” it seems pointlessly paradoxical to relativize truth to purposes or situations. On the other hand, “justified for me but not for you” (or “justified in my culture but not in yours”) makes perfect sense. So when James said that “the true is the good in the way of belief,” he was accused of confusing justification with truth, the relative with the absolute.

James would, indeed, have done better to say that phrases like “the good in the way of belief” and “what it is better for us to believe” are interchangeable with “justified” rather than with “true.” But he could have gone on to say that we have no criterion of truth other than justification, and that justification and betterness-to-believe will always be as relative to audiences (and to ranges of truth candidates) as is goodness to purposes and rightness to situations. Granted that “true” is an absolute term, its conditions of application will always be relative. For there is no such thing as belief being justified sans phrase – justified once and for all – for the same reason that there is no such thing as a belief that can be known, once and for all, to be indubitable. There are plenty of beliefs (e.g., “Two and two are four”; “The Holocaust took place”) about which nobody with whom we bother to argue has any doubt. But there are no beliefs that can be known to be immune to all possible doubt.

This last claim sums up the antifoundationalism that has now become the conventional wisdom of analytic philosophers. But antifoundationalism in epistemology is not enough to rid us of the metaphysical distinction between
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appearance and reality. For it does not diminish the appeal of the following argument: since truth is an absolute notion and consists in correspondence, there must be an absolute, non-description-relative, intrinsic nature of reality to be corresponded to. Granted that the criterion of truth is justification, and that justification is relative, the nature of truth is not.

To get around this argument, we followers of James and Nietzsche deny one of its premises: namely, that truth is correspondence to reality. But then we are told that we have a duty to offer an alternative theory of truth, one that tells us what the nature of truth really is. When, like James and Nietzsche before us, we fail to produce such a theory, we are told that “the pragmatist attack on correspondence has failed.”

The greatest of my many intellectual debts to Donald Davidson is my realization that nobody should even try to specify the nature of truth. A fortiori, pragmatists should not. Whether or not one agrees with Davidson that it is important to be able to give a definition of “true-in-L” for a given natural language (by means of a Tarski-type “truth theory” for that language), one can profit from his arguments that there is no possibility of giving a definition of “true” that works for all such languages. Davidson has helped us realize that the very absoluteness of truth is a good reason for thinking “true” indefinable and for thinking that no theory of the nature of truth is possible. It is only the relative about which there is anything to say. (This is why the God of orthodox monotheists, for example, remains so tiresomely ineffable.)

Davidson’s nonrepresentationalist way of looking at truth arises from his conviction that Tarski is the only philosopher to have said anything useful about truth and that Tarski’s discovery was that we have no understanding of truth that is distinct from our understanding of translation. The latter doctrine is puzzling to philosophers who regard our understanding of truth as an understanding of a word–world relation such as “fitting” or “correspondence” or “accurate representation,” but it sums up the upshot of Davidson’s attack on representationalist views of language.

If pragmatists cannot offer a theory of truth, what can they do? They can point out, I argue in the first essay of this volume, that truth is not a goal of inquiry. If “truth” is the name of such a goal then, indeed, there is no truth. For the absoluteness of truth makes it unserviceable as such a goal. A goal is something you can know that you are getting closer to, or farther away from. But there is no way to know our distance from truth, nor even whether

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we are closer to it than our ancestors were. For, once again, the only criterion we have for applying the word “true” is justification, and justification is always relative to an audience. So it is also relative to that audience’s lights – the purposes that such an audience wants served and the situation in which it finds itself. This means that the question “Do our practices of justification lead to truth?” is as unanswerable as it is unpragmatic. It is unanswerable because there is no way to privilege our current purposes and interests. It is unpragmatic because the answer to it would make no difference whatever to our practice.

But surely, it will be objected, we know that we are closer to truth. Surely we have been making both intellectual and moral progress.

Certainly we have been making progress, by our lights. That is to say, we are much better able to serve the purposes we wish to serve, and to cope with the situations we believe we face, than our ancestors would have been. But when we hypostatize the adjective “true” into “Truth” and ask about our relation to it, we have absolutely nothing to say.

We can, if we like, use this hypostatization in the same way that admirers of Plato have always used other hypostatizations – Beauty, Goodness, and Rightness. That is, we can tell a story about how recent developments in the arts or science or morals or politics have gotten us closer to these stately reifications. But the point of telling such stories is unclear. For nominalizing such adjectives does nothing to help us answer skeptical questions – for example: How do we know that greater predictive power and greater control of the environment (including a greater ability to cure diseases, build bombs, explore space, etc.) gets us closer to truth, conceived of as an accurate representation of how things are in themselves, apart from human needs and interests? How do we know that increased health, security, equality of opportunity, longevity, freedom from humiliation, and similar indices of greater human flourishing are indices of moral or political progress?

A lot of people still want philosophers to produce interesting answers to these questions. Such people will get nothing out of Nietzsche, James, Davidson, or the essays in this volume. Kant’s prognosis remains as sound as ever: as long as we try to project from the relative and conditioned to the absolute and unconditioned, we shall keep the pendulum swinging between dogmatism and skepticism. The only way to stop this increasingly tiresome pendulum swing is to change our conception of what philosophy is good for. But that is not something which will be accomplished by a few neat arguments. It will be accomplished, if it ever is, by a long, slow process of cultural change – that is to say, of change in common sense, changes in the intuitions available for being pumped up by philosophical arguments.
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Once one gives up the appearance–reality distinction, and the attempt to relate such things as predictive success and diminished cruelty to the intrinsic nature of reality, one has to give separate accounts of progress in science and in morals. We call something a science insofar as it enables us to predict what will happen, and therefore to influence what will happen. There are, of course, many criteria for good scientific theories other than successful prediction, and many motives for becoming a natural scientist other than the urge to help bring nature under control. But prediction is nevertheless a necessary condition for being put in the box labeled "science." We hesitate to put economics, sociology, history, or literary criticism in that box, because none of those disciplines seems capable of answering questions of the form “If we do this, what will happen?”

Once one sees that “Science can predict insofar as it gets reality right” is an incantation rather than an explanation (because we have no test for the explanans distinct from our test for the explanandum), it seems enough simply to define scientific progress as an increased ability to make predictions. Once one gives up on the idea that we have become less cruel and treat each other better because we have more fully grasped the true nature of human beings or of human rights or of human obligations (more pseudo-explanations), it seems enough to define moral progress as becoming like ourselves at our best (people who are not racist, not aggressive, not intolerant, etc., etc.). But what of philosophical progress? How does that relate to scientific and moral progress?

As I see it, philosophical progress occurs to the extent that we find a way of integrating the worldviews and the moral intuitions we inherited from our ancestors with new scientific theories or new sociopolitical institutions and theories or other novelties. I have often cited Dewey’s doctrine that “the distinctive office, problems and subject-matter of philosophy grow out of stresses and strains in the community life in which a given form of philosophy arises.”3 The stresses and strains Dewey has in mind are those that arise from attempts to pour bubbly and expansive new liquids into old bottles. I have also frequently cited Dewey’s dictum that “philosophy can proffer nothing but hypotheses, and . . . those hypotheses are of value only as they render men’s minds more sensitive to the life about them.”4

That may seem an odd way to describe the activity in which men like Plato, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, and Dewey himself engaged. But it becomes more plausible when one notes that one way of becoming more sensitive to

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4 Ibid., 22.
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the achievements and the promise of one’s own time is to stop asking questions that were formulated in earlier times. The great Western philosophers should be read as therapeutic rather than as constructive: as having told us what problems not to discuss: scholastic problems in the case of Descartes, Cartesian problems in the case of Kant, Kantian problems in the case of Hegel, and metaphysical problems (including those raised by Hegel’s attempt to prove that reality is intrinsically spiritual in character) in the cases of Nietzsche, James, and Dewey.

It would be an oversimplification to say that the task of philosophy is to stop people from thinking of things in obsolete terms inherited from great dead philosophers – to persuade them to throw away the indispensable ladders up which our culture has climbed in the past. But that is certainly a large part of their job. If you try to impose Aristotelian terminology on Galileo, or Cartesian terminology on Darwin, or the terminology of Kantian moral philosophy on debates about abortion, you will be making needless trouble for yourself. To stuff off an obsolete terminology makes us more sensitive to the life about us, for it helps us to stop trying to cut new, recalcitrant material to fit old patterns.

I end various essays in this volume (in particular the first and third) by urging that a culture in which we no longer took the skeptic’s question about whether we are getting nearer to truth would be better than the one in which we ask the philosophy professors to assure us that we are indeed doing so. For in such a culture we would be more sensitive to the marvelous diversity of human languages, and of the social practices associated with those languages, because we shall have ceased asking whether they “correspond to” some nonhuman, eternal entity. Instead of asking, “Are there truths out there that we shall never discover?” we would ask, “Are there ways of talking and acting that we have not yet explored?” Instead of asking whether the intrinsic nature of reality is yet in sight (the secular counterpart of asking whether things are dis aliter visum), we should ask whether each of the various descriptions of reality employed in our various cultural activities is the best we can imagine – the best means to the ends served by those activities.

Such a change in our intellectual habits would have at least two more specific advantages. First, it would help us stop assigning one of these activities (religion, for example, or natural science) priority over others. Second, it would help us stop worrying about objectivity by letting us be satisfied with intersubjectivity. It would help us stop asking idle questions like “Are there objective facts about right and wrong in the same sense that there are objective facts about electrons and protons?”

Dewey anticipated Habermas by claiming that there is nothing to the
notion of objectivity save that of intersubjective agreement – agreement reached by free and open discussion of all available hypotheses and policies. He hoped that the widespread adoption of this view would render us more sensitive to the life about us. It would put an end to attempts to set up a pecking order among cultural activities and among parts of our lives. By getting rid of the Kantian distinction between the cognitive, the moral, and the aesthetic, for example, it would stop the “hard” sciences from looking down on the soft, stop both from looking down on the arts, and end attempts to put philosophy on the secure path of a science. It would stop people from worrying about the “scientific” or “cognitive” status of a discipline or of a social practice. It would stop philosophers trying to cordon off a special area for themselves and would sweep away distinctions like that between the transcendent and the empirical (Kant) or the conceptual and the factual (Ryle) or the ontological and the ontic (Heidegger).

If one wants to carry through on these Deweyan suggestions, it helps to think of progress in the way in which Thomas Kuhn urged us to think of it: as the ability to solve not only the problems our ancestors solved, but also some new problems. On this account, Newton made progress over Aristotle, and Einstein over Newton, but neither came closer to the truth, or to the intrinsic character of reality, than any of the others. Hume made progress over Leibniz and Hegel over Hume, but the later figures were no closer than the earlier to the Correct Solution to the Problems of Philosophy. Analogously, the Athenian polis made moral and political progress over the Persian monarchy, the slaveholding-abolishing nation-states of nineteenth-century Europe over the Athenian polis, and the social democracies of modern times progress over their proletarian-immiserating nineteenth-century predecessors. But none of these societies was closer to the Demand of Morality.

If one says that later societies made progress in recognizing the existence of human rights, I argue in the ninth essay in this volume, one should only mean that they conformed more closely to the way we wealthy, secure, educated inhabitants of the First World think people should treat one another. We are quite justified in thinking as we do, but we cannot check our view of the matter against the intrinsic nature of moral reality. We will not get anywhere by asking our philosophy professors to make sure that there really are such things as human rights and that they are as we describe them. Nor will we get anywhere by telling those who think differently that they are out of touch with moral reality or that they are behaving irrationally.

The question of whether there really are human rights is, from the point of view I am proposing, as pointless as the question of whether there really are quarks. Human rights are no more or less “objective” than quarks, but
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this is just to say that reference to human rights is as indispensable to debates in the UN Security Council as is reference to quarks in debates in the Royal Society. The causal independence of quarks from human discourse is not a mark of reality as opposed to appearance; it is simply an unquestioned part of our talk about quarks. Anybody who doesn’t know this fact about quarks is as unlikely to grasp what they are as is somebody who thinks that human rights were there before humans. We can say, with Foucault, that both human rights and homosexuality are recent social constructions, but only if we say, with Bruno Latour, that quarks are too. There is no point to saying that the former are “just” social constructions, for all the reasons that could be used to back up this claim are reasons that would apply to quarks as well.

One of the benefits of getting rid of the notion of the intrinsic nature of reality is that you get rid of the notion that quarks and human rights differ in “ontological status.” This, in turn, helps you reject the suggestion that natural science should serve as a paradigm for the rest of culture, and in particular that philosophical progress consists in philosophers’ getting more scientific. These latter bad ideas played a part in the genesis of the intellectual tradition now known as “analytic philosophy.” But that tradition has, since Kuhn, been in a position to throw away those particular ladders.

It is often thought that an attack on the correspondence theory of truth, on “realism,” is an attack on analytic philosophy itself. But this is a mistake. The intellectual tradition begun by Frege and Russell led to Sellars and Davidson (analytic philosophers by anybody’s account), just as the intellectual tradition established by Galileo and Newton led to Einstein. Nobody thinks that Einstein stabbed modern physics in the back by denying some central Newtonian doctrines, and nobody should think that Davidson stabbed analytic philosophy in the back by refusing to take the distinction between realism and antirealism seriously, or that Sellars did so by refusing to take seriously the distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description.

On the view of philosophical progress offered in this volume, philosophy makes progress not by becoming more rigorous but by becoming more imaginative. Progress in this field, as in most others, is made by a few people in each generation glimpsing a possibility that had not previously been grasped. Frege and Mill, Russell and Heidegger, Dewey and Habermas, Davidson and Derrida are people of this sort. The rest of us – the underlaborers to whom it is left to clean up and dispose of what these imaginative pioneers have seen to be rubbish – perform a useful social function. We do the dirty work. (But this is, of course, not our only function. We also do a lot
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of pedagogic, drum-beating, and popularizing work.) To say that we perform our work “rigorously” or “professionally” is just to say that we perform it in ways acceptable to, and adapted to, the community of philosophy professors to which we belong.

There are, of course, many such communities. Comparing them with one another is a matter of comparing the legacies of original thinkers with one another. Each legacy has obvious advantages and obvious disadvantages. To argue that Continental philosophy ought to become analytic, or conversely, or that we should revive natural theology or Husserlian phenomenology or Aristotelian essentialism, is to argue that the balance of advantages and disadvantages dictates a certain decision.

I have no such argument to offer, or any views about what form philosophy ought to take. I see no point in saying that philosophy as such ought to be done historically or ahistorically, or in saying that one or another area of philosophy is “first philosophy.” There is no more point in discussing “philosophy” in a sense broad enough to include Parmenides, Averroes, Kierkegaard, and Quine than in discussing “art” in a sense broad enough to include Sophocles, Cimabue, Zola, and Nijinsky. The attempt to gain neutrality by rising to that level of abstraction produces only banal platitudes or polemical slogans. The attempt to state the nature or the task or the mission of philosophy is usually just an attempt to build one’s philosophical preferences into a definition of “philosophy.”

The so-called analytic–Continental split is the location of many such building projects, and of many attempts to excommunicate philosophers one does not wish to read by defining “philosophy” in such a way as to exclude their work. As I see it, this split is, first and foremost, a split between two disciplinary matrices – and in particular between two ways of training would-be philosophy professors. These two matrices have emerged and solidified in the past hundred years, are very different indeed, and are very unlikely to blend with each other. If you get an “analytic” training, you will be encouraged to concentrate on the “frontline” problems, those discussed in current journal articles by important analytic philosophers. You may well treat your courses in the history of philosophy, and perhaps also your courses in formal logic, as distractions from this training – good for the soul, maybe, but not for the career. If you get a “Continental” training, you will be expected to learn quite a lot about the history of philosophy and to make an informed choice among various differing narratives that connect events in that history (those offered by, for example, Hegel, Heidegger, and Blumenberg). You may never have read any “analytic” philosopher, except perhaps Wittgenstein.

The training you get influences the books you are likely to read and the
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sort of philosophers you are best able to admire. Of the three philosophers discussed most extensively in this volume, Davidson will be more highly appreciated for his originality by those raised “analytically” than will either Habermas or Derrida. In the case of those raised “Continental,” the converse will be true. But such differences in background are, of course, overcome all the time.

I have sometimes been mistakenly commended for originality, simply because I often put apparently dissimilar figures—for example, Nietzsche and James, Davidson and Derrida—in the same box. But there is a difference between being original and being ecstatic. The latter is just a result of getting easily bored and looking around for something new. I get restless, look for new heroes while remaining reasonably loyal to old ones, and so have wound up a syncretist. But even the most successful syncretism cannot hope to imitate the truly heroic philosophical achievements: the ones that let us see everything from a new angle, that induce a Gestalt-switch.

Inducing such a switch is the most difficult, and the rarest, of philosophical achievements. There is no more reason to expect such a heroic achievement to arise out of the analytic tradition in philosophy than out of the Continental tradition, or conversely. Genius always takes us by surprise. It can blossom in any climate, under any sun. When Goethe was asked whether he or Schiller was the greater poet, he replied, “Just be glad you have both of us.” That seems to me the appropriate attitude for philosophers on both sides of the analytic–Continental divide.

Philosophy will continue to make progress as long as geniuses keep on emerging. The rubbish-disposal projects of nongeniuses help clear, and prepare, the ground for such emergence. Or, to vary the metaphor, they fill the compost heaps out of which something unexpected may, with luck, emerge. This unexpected growth cannot be encouraged by sedulously following a “method” (for example, detecting nonsense or bracketing experiences or analyzing concepts or deconstructing concepts or assuming the transcendental standpoint or speaking ontologically). So-called methods are simply descriptions of the activities engaged in by enthusiastic imitators of one or another original mind—which Kuhn would call the “research programs” to which their works gave rise.

5 Back in the sixties, when I was a thrusting young analytic philosopher, I heard an admired senior colleague, Stuart Hampshire, describe a star-studded international conference on some vast and pretentious topic—a conference from which he had just returned and the results of which he had been asked to sum up at the final session. “No trick at all,” Hampshire explained, “for an old syncretist hack like me.” At that moment I realized what I wanted to be when I grew up.