

## New American Pragmatism and the Pragmatist Truth

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### 1. Pragmatism in Spain

Hispanic philosophy<sup>1</sup> is no longer what it used to be. One of the defining features of Hispanic way of thought in the last century has possibly been its isolation from the rest of the world and an individualism of which Spaniards have always been proud. Fortunately, this feature does not characterize Contemporary Hispanic Philosophy (at least that brand that vindicates strong links to the Analytic Tradition), since with the very same passion with which Spanish Philosophers defended their differential traits in past centuries, are we nowadays determined to defend our place in the international scene. A proof of this interest in not-being-different is the fact that a substantial part of the philosophy produced in Spain is not produced in Spanish.

In order to understand the reception of American pragmatism in Spain, a handful of general ideas should be taken into account:

(a) Professor Nubiola has settled the issue of the mutual indifference that has defined the relationships between Hispanic and North American philosophical traditions. Being this fact entirely true of the first generation of American pragmatists - Peirce, James, Dewey - it is not so of the "second generation". Thus, it is possible to pursue the influence of classical American pragmatism now in Spain and Hispanic countries indirectly, through the influence exerted in Hispanic philosophical communities by the philosophical offsprings of the Classical pragmatists.

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<sup>1</sup> I use the expression in the sense explained in Prof. Nubiola's paper in this meeting, who in turn inherits it from Jorge Gracia and Eduardo Nicol.

(b) Pragmatism is placed at the beginning and at the end of the lifetime of Analytic Philosophy. Neither the raising nor the particular pathway undertaken by the Analytic movement could be understood without reference to the parallel development of Pragmatism. The basic claim of logical positivism, the verifiability principle, has striking similarities with the attitude towards meaning advised by the Pragmatist Maxim. American Pragmatism played a relevant role in the origins of the analytic movement in Europe; just consider the influence of William James in Wittgenstein (Goodman 2002), and the mutual influence between Ramsey and Wittgenstein (Glock 2005), and Quine and Carnap. Pragmatism is today the natural realm to which many former analytic philosophers arrive. Further circumstances that speak for the strong connections between the two movements are the philosophical evolution of emblematic analytic philosophers, such as Wittgenstein and Davidson. And today Robert Brandom, an American pragmatist disciple of another one, Sellars, defends a pragmatist post-analytic *Weltanschauung* about how meaning and content is produced. Analytic Philosophy and contemporary pragmatism have outlined the shape that a relevant part of the philosophy produced in Spain presents. The influence of Quine, Putnam and Rorty, all of them included in Haack's recent selection of pragmatists of all times (Haack 2006), is ubiquitous and undeniable. And Haack, probably the most Peircean among the living philosophers, is a referent of first level in Spanish Philosophy of Science.

(c) Pragmatism is in vogue in Spanish contemporary philosophy and the variety of research projects that include the words "pragmatism" and "pragmatics" is steadily increasing. The same can be said of meetings, workshops and conferences dedicated to the topic. Not all events that attempt a pragmatist perspective on a topic are directly influenced by the classical American pragmatists, but undoubtedly the works of Putnam, Brandom, Haack and Rorty already belong to our philosophical background. A proof is this ubiquitous influence is seen in the series of *Meetings on Pragmatism*, the first and the second organized in Santiago de Compostela (with Nathan Houser and Hilary Putnam as invited speakers), the III Meeting took place in Granada (with R. Brandom and J. McDowell) and the IV in Murcia (with S. Haack as main speaker). The IV Meeting focused on *truth and the ethics of belief*, probable the topic that lies as a background of all debates in pragmatism from classical times until now. Today, I would like to offer some considerations about the question of truth in pragmatism.

## 2. Pragmatist Truth

What we should understand by truth is an open debate not only in contemporary philosophy but also in the realm of pragmatism of all times. In the classic period, it was represented in the discussion between Peirce and James, and more recently it has produced lively discussions between Haack and Rorty.

Haack defends, against relativism and cynicism that she attributes to Rorty, that there is one “unambiguous, non-relative truth-concept” (2008a, p. 16). Rorty, in contrast, rejects that the notion of truth plays any relevant role in philosophy, politics nor science (1979, p. 640). In spite of the apparent tension, both are genuine heirs of classical pragmatist positions, Haack of Peirce’s view and Rorty of the common interpretation of James’s account. My aim in what follows will be to explain how it is possible to be pragmatist without renouncing a classical and non-relativistic conception of truth. In fact, a serious analysis of the meaning of truth ascriptions allows us to declare that both parties, the Peirce-Haack side but also the James-Rorty one, enclose their grain of truth. A correct understanding of the meaning of truth is thus very relevant, for its own sake and for the development of pragmatism.

An obvious, although not always sufficiently stressed, distinction is the one established between the level of truth and the level of truths. Truth, the notion, can be considered as clear while truths considered unreachable, or truth as empty and truths as attainable, or truth and truths as understandable and at hand, or else both levels out of reach. All these combinations are possible. Confusion between truth and truths has been a source of difficulties, and is responsible of the pragmatist practice of understanding truth as an epistemic notion and as identical with some subject-relative values, such as certainty, complete justification or absence of contradicting information. The optimistic forecast of Peirce about the accomplishments of science in the future, as well as the pessimistic attitude of Rorty about the possibility of obtaining certainty, share this confusion at their origin. In the Introduction of her (2008a), when she distinguishes between the unity of truth and the plurality of truths, Haack asks: “Isn’t this, you may wonder, too obvious to need saying?”. Her answer is “No. For gradually unraveling first the densely tangled arguments that have persuaded some philosophers that there are many truth-concepts, and others that there is no viable truth-concept at all, and then the densely tangled arguments that have persuaded some philosophers that there are no truths, or that only The Whole Truth About Absolutely

Everything is really-and-truly true, can we appreciate both the simplicity of the idea of truth, and its subtleties.” (2008a, p. 16) What Haack says is of course true, but still it is not the whole truth. For besides the notion of truth and the multiplicity of propositions to which the notion applies, the set<sup>2</sup> of truths, there also is an ambiguity in the abstract noun “truth” that complicates things even more. “Truth” sometimes refers to the semantic notion, and sometimes to the final and complete set of all its instances. This second sense allows James to consider truth as convergence in the long run and Peirce to look for it at the end of enquiry, a time and a place too far away to find there the semantic notion. The semantic notion is what is dimly hinted at when one assumes the unsophisticated slogan of correspondence. Some version or other of the correspondence slogan, *that truth is accordance with what it is*, is assumed by Peirce, James and Dewey, and also by Haack, and all of them correctly understand that the slogan is empty.

James, Rorty’s hero, is mainly interested on truths. “Our account of truth is an account of truths in the plural, of processes of leading, realized *in rebus*, and having only this quality in common, that they *pay*”, James says in (1906/1975), (Haack 2006: pp.319-20). As account of truths, the epistemic perspective is completely adequate, only that it is incomplete for it leaves out the issue of the meaning of truth. Nevertheless what James’s account is *not* is either psychologist or relativist, since he recognizes the many ways in which the mind is not free to make up truths at will: “Between the coercions of the sensible order and those of the ideal order, our mind is thus wedged tightly. Our ideas must agree with realities, be such realities concrete or abstract, be they facts or be they principles, under penalty of endless inconsistency and frustration” (James, *op. cit.* p. 316). At this point James considers the two sides that, even in the epistemological perspective, the issue presents: the constructive character of the verification process, the aspect in which Rorty seems to be more interested, and also the predetermined character of the resisting reality. Accepting some kind of external constraints is necessary in order to understand truth as correspondence, even at the harmless sense of many pragmatists.

In the dispute between Haack and Rorty for the pragmatism’s heritage, Haack has accused Rorty of relativism, a label that Rorty rejects. In (1979, p. 166), Rorty says

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<sup>2</sup> The term “set” is used here in an informal sense. Strictly speaking, there cannot be the set of all truth. It is an inconsistent multiplicity that gives rise to Cantor paradox if considered as a unity. See (Grim 1991).

“‘Relativism’ is the view that every belief on a certain topic, or perhaps about any topic, is as good as every other. No one holds that view”. True, no one has defended this view as it stands. But there are related views that Rorty does defend that also deserve the title “relativism”. One of them, a kind of relativism about truths, is the view that the conversational rules are the only constraint to enquiry. In (1979, p. 165), Rorty says: “Let me sum up by offering a third and final characterization of pragmatism: it is the doctrine that there are no constraints to inquiry save conversational ones”. That there are conversational constraints to enquiry is not in dispute. Nevertheless, if by this claim one wants to defend that there is nothing in the “external world” that offers resistance to enquiry, then it is false. A second view, a kind of relativism about truth, is the thesis that *truth* is an empty notion. If by this claim one understands that truth does not represent a property of objects, then it is true. But if by it one wants also suggest, as Rorty has done, that there are no objective circumstances that justify the adscription of truth to a content, then it is false. Although he is right in a general intuition that understands the adscription of truth as closer to assertability conditions than to correspondence.

The relativist brand of pragmatism, as it has been attributed to Rorty, James and Dewey, is then an equivocal position; under the same name different theses are distinguishable. In all cases, the basic claims associated with pragmatism/relativism have an interpretation in which they are true (although quite trivial and possibly different from the one intended by its proponents) and another one in which they are false and discouraging for the philosophical enterprise. Standardly, the right (and trivial) interpretations have to do with the fact that truth is not a first order property; it does not represent a property of objects at the same level as *being an English sentence* or *being a conservative politician*. But this trivial fact doesn’t lend any support to the wrong suggestions that truth has no meaning, that the truth predicate can be ascribed to a content at will, or that truth matters neither in science nor in philosophy.

### 3. The Point

It is possible to adopt a pragmatist attitude *towards inquiry* — any kind of inquiry — that in the present case means *towards the procedure of inquiring about truth*, without assuming a

pragmatist theory of truth. For a pragmatist theory of truth, as it is typically understood, possesses epistemic tones that (we consider) are alien to the notion's meaning. Truth is not an epistemic notion, although the enquiry about its meaning is, as every enquiry, an epistemic enterprise.

The *Pragmatist Maxim*<sup>3</sup> advises to identify the meaning of a notion with its practical effects; following it, we consider what speakers do with words as the enquiry's point of departure. The actions that define the communicative behavior of rational beings are our raw facts; they are the phenomena to be explained. Together with the Pragmatist Maxim, our attitude to enquiry is critically commonsensist and synechist.

We defend, with Haack, that there is one truth but many truths (2008b, pp. 43-44) and also, as it can be read in her *Defending Science* (2007), that

- (i) “[G]enuine inquiry is a good-faith effort to arrive at the truth of the matter in question, whatever the color of that truth may be” (2007, p. 96; 2008, p.50 ) and that
- (ii) “Scientists are in the business of seeking true answers to their questions” (*loc.cit.*).

Claims (i) and (ii), and simplifications of them such as (iii) *truth is the aim of science* or (iv) *scientists seek the truth*, are neutral claims regarding most of the traditional problems related to the notion of truth and its definition. In particular, they do not imply that truth is correspondence with reality or that truth is a value, either epistemic or moral. *Justification* is an epistemic value; *truthfulness* and *honesty* are moral values. Truth is neither; it is an intra-systemic higher-order notion with very precise tasks to perform in the general communicative goal of the use of natural languages. Supporting claims such as (i) and (ii) does not imply either taking sides in the debate between realism vs. anti-realism.

The reason of this neutrality, to say it directly, is that (i), (ii), (iii), (iv), and many others of similar kind are general claims about propositions whose instances are quite trivial assertions that do not involve any of the controversial issues in epistemology.

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<sup>3</sup> Peirce answered the question of meaning in the following way: "Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object" (Peirce, CP 5.2, 1878/1902).

The sentences by means of which truth is ascribed to a propositional content are known as “truth ascriptions”. The simplest kind of truth ascription is a sentence such as (v),

(v) What Victoria says is true.

In the language’s toolbox, truth ascriptions work as propositional variables. Out of a context, they possess linguistic meaning, .i. e., they are well formed sentences of a language that convey the kind of information attached to the conventional side of meaning. What they don’t possess, out of a context, is a content, i.e. the kind of information that possess semantic and logical relevance. The sentence (v) can be used in different contexts to assert diverse contents. If uttered in a context in which Victoria has said (vi),

(vi) Obama has been elected,

the content of (v) is that Obama has been elected. If uttered in a context in which Victoria has said (vii),

(vii) Spain is a parliamentary monarchy,

the content of (v) in this context would be that Spain is a parliamentary monarchy.

This is the only sense in which truth can be understood as relative or even empty. It is in some sense, but not in the sense intended by Rorty.

Variables are necessary to express generality. General thoughts are not about any particular item but about a whole class of individuals, events, propositions, etc. To make a general claim about propositions propositional variables are required. There are different kinds of propositional variable but truth ascriptions are a distinguished one. The following sentences, (viii) and (ix), are examples of general truth ascriptions,

(viii) Everything the Pope says is true,

(ix) Quantum Mechanics is true.

They are means of attributing truth to a general class of propositions, namely to every proposition asserted by the Pope and to every proposition covered by Quantum Mechanics.

And the point is that the sentences (i)-(iv) are generalizations, i. e. they don't express particular propositions but general rules. Let's call this claim "T1",

[T1] Truth ascriptions work as propositional variables. When they include quantifiers, truth ascriptions codify general thoughts about propositions.

Which is the information transmitted by claims (i) and (ii)? What do we understand when we understand (i) and (ii)? Let's see first which information is *not* transmitted by (i) and (ii). By claims such as (i) and (ii) speakers do not express "a belief of the primary sort"<sup>4</sup>. The statement "scientists are in the business of seeking true answers to their questions" does not rule out any truth definition. Similarly, the opposite claim, that

(x) "Truth is not a goal of enquiry",

as made by Rorty in his (2000b, p. 262) is compatible, his author notwithstanding, with a theory of truth as correspondence. Rorty's claim rests on the assumption that truth represents the highest degree of justification, and his strategy is to stress that complete certainty is unrealizable — this claim and its contradictory are epistemic claims. Truth, Rorty thinks, is among the "impossible, indefinable, sublime objects of desire" (2000a, p. 2). At this point he coincides with metaphysical realists in that truth is too high an ideal to be included among human goals. This point has been endlessly debated both among epistemologists and metaphysicians. Whatever the relative merits of the contrasting positions might be, the notion of truth — which is neither metaphysical nor epistemic — is not involved. It is used, it is put to work as a tool to produce the propositional variables required to discuss such a general topics, but neither its definition nr its characterization are at stake.

Scientist seek for answers that are *true*, it is said on (ii). They seek for answers that really represent things the way they are, answers that suppose an advancement of knowledge, that help human beings understand how the world is, answers that offer scientist an accurate representation of reality, etc. All this is correct — we might have said "true" instead of "correct" without begging the question — but these different formulations do not embody a further step in the understanding of claim (i); in no case are they analyses, not to say

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<sup>4</sup> Ramsey used this expression in (1929). He applies it to general propositions such as "All men are mortal". Of this proposition Ramsey says that "[i]t expresses an inference we are at any time prepared to make, not a belief of the primary sort" (*op. cit.*, p. 146). Truth-sentences as the ones analyzed in this paper express general propositions too.



definitions, of the notion of truth. Instead, they are alternative ways of saying the same thing, mere rewordings of the original truth-sentence. None of the different alternatives permits a theory of truth to take off, as the history of the issue shows. Thus, our proposal is taking seriously the general principles of pragmatism and facing the real practices.

All those who, for a reason or other, are in the business of seeking true answers to their questions are in the business of seeking true answers for *particular* questions, questions such as

- (xi) Which is the structure of DNA?
- (xii) Is there life on Mars?
- (xiii) How are prime numbers distributed among integers?
- (xiv) What is the effect of inflation on the rise of unemployment?

If scientists are in the business of seeking true answers for the question of which is the structure of DNA, then they want to know whether

- (xv) DNA has a double helix structure,

i.e, they want to know that DNA has a double helix structure in the case that DNA has a double helix structure, and that DNA does not have a double helix structure if this would have been the case.

If it is question (xii) the question for which scientists are in the business of seeking true answers, they seek to know whether, for instance,

- (xvi) There has been bacterial life in Mars.

One of the true answers for question (xiii) would be

- (xvii) Every even integer greater than two is the sum of two primes,

if it is the case that every integer greater than two is the sum of two primes. And so on...

In general, for some  $p$ , scientists are in the business of seeking whether  $p$ ; the end of their search is either  $p$ , if  $p$ , or else not- $p$ , if not- $p$ .

The European pragmatist F. Ramsey saw this point with complete clarity. Following his suggestions, the logical form of general truth ascriptions should be identified with variable hypotheticals, i.e. universal propositions; thus a truth sentence such as *science pursues truth* is analyzed as

(xviii) For all  $p$  (in a certain domain<sup>5</sup>), if  $p$ , science wants to be in the position to assert  $p$ .

Singular truth ascriptions have, according to Ramsey, a conjunctive logical form. A truth-ascriptions such as “She said the truth” can be rendered in a semi-formal language with propositional variables as

(xix) She said that  $p$  and  $p$ .

The thesis that we share with Ramsey is that in order to carry out the tasks performed by truth ascriptions, speakers require truth terms or their synonyms, unless the language in question is enriched with propositional variables (and in the case of general truth ascriptions, with quantifiers too). Truth terms perform in natural languages the task performed in some artificial languages by propositional variables and the quantifiers binding them. Truth ascriptions express general propositions whose content is acquired from their particular instances.

#### 4. Meaning and Criteria

An explanation of how it is possible that Peirce and Haack, on the one hand, and James, Dewey and Rorty, on the other, stress on characteristics that seem to be true about truth is that they mix up meaning with criteria, which is an alternative way of signaling the distinction between truth and truths.

The question of the criteria to ascribe truth to a particular content has an straightforward answer. A agent is entitled to assert that content  $p$  is true exactly in the same cases in which he is entitled to assert  $p$ . Let’s call this claim [T2],

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<sup>5</sup> Science is not interested in every content that can be rendered in propositional form. It is not interested in particular contents, contents such as whether I ate fish yesterday, for instance. Nor even in any general content. Presumably, it is not interested in the dietetic habits of blond people that vote conservative.

[T2] The criteria of the application of truth to a content are identical to the assertion criteria for this very content.

What is then the level at which the discussions about realism and anti-realism, relativism, fallibilism and dogmatism emerge? When the discussion about the constraints, conversational, physical or metaphysical, takes place? A correct, although not very specific, answer is: at the level of assertion. The debates realism vs. anti-realism and fallibilism vs. dogmatism belong to different domains; to metaphysics, the first; to epistemology, the second. The debate about constraints are transversal, it belongs to semantic, epistemology and metaphysics. The metaphysical debate of realism vs. anti-realism has two poles; one of them is the general philosophical question of whether there is a ready-made world independent of mankind; the other pole has to do with the debate about whether the fundamental nature of meaning is representation. Independently on the answers we give to them, one thing is clear: nobody rejects the possibility of assertion, nobody rejects the utility of language to express propositional contents. This minimal acknowledgement of the role of some uses of language is enough to “ascend” a level, or to move to a second step and endorse the content of an assertive act in an explicit manner by means of a truth ascription. The situation is as follows:

Act of assertion 1:

Speaker A: Obama was elected

Speaker B: What speaker A has said is true

Act of Assertion 2:

Speaker A: Science has proved the immortality of the soul

Speaker B: What speaker A has said is true

Act of Assertion 3:

Speaker A: Every even integer is the sum of two primes

Speaker B: What speaker A has said is true.

Truth-ascriptions only appear once an act of assertion has occurred. Then, (singular) truth ascriptions behave as a means to endorse the content of the previous act. Of course, this can

be done justifiedly or unjustifiedly, but the misuse of a resource is something that should be explained by its meaning. In the same sense in which a theory of the artwork has to account for good and bad pieces, a theory of the meaning of truth has to explain its incorrect usages. In both correct and incorrect uses, the meaning and role of the truth ascription is invariant.

Endorsement of particular or general contents, or of general rules, is the activity that explains the meaning of truth terms. This activity is independent of the theoretical debates about the ultimate nature of reality. And it is also independent of the epistemological debate of when and under which circumstances one is justified in accepting a content as a safe piece of knowledge. Be it as it may, truth comes afterwards. The epistemological difficulty stands at the level of particular contents, in one case, or at the level of the theory, in the other. If a truth ascription is used to endorse a not-quantified content, as in (xx),

(xx) Victoria said that she was at home last night, and she was at home last night,

the epistemological difficulty lies in determining the filters or tests that the content needs to have passed to be safely asserted. Once this difficulty is left behind, their endorsement by means of a truth ascription does not add any further epistemological constrain to the assertion level.

The situation in the case of theories is basically the same. Think of real scientific practices; once that a scientific community relies on a theory and uses it in their experimental and inferential processes, lending to it explicit support by means of a truth ascription, such as (xx), does not add any further epistemological trait.

In sum, truth is a higher order notion that has complex syntactic, semantic and pragmatic aspects. There is just one notion of truth, applicable to common life and astrophysics, to mathematics and ethics, but many truths. And the lack of ambiguity of the truth notion is independent of the degree of certainty that human beings are able to attach to particular propositions. It is possible to be fallibilist about truths while conceding to the notion a precise meaning and role. The precise meaning of truth has to be found, as the Pragmatist Maxim advices, in the use that real speakers make of it in real communicative exchanges.

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