

THE UNTIDY PROCESS OF GROPING FOR TRUTH
Susan Haack

In many academic circles today, Susan Haack observes, we encounter a 'new almost-orthodoxy' which distrusts the notions of truth, fact and evidence and rejects such ideals as honest inquiry and respect for evidence. Supporters of this 'Higher Dismissiveness', noting, correctly, that 'truth' is very often only what the powerful have managed to get accepted as such, draw the mistaken conclusion that those who still speak of knowledge and truth are guilty of naïvete and 'white male thinking'.

In this paper Haack argues that the Higher Dismissiveness is not only confused, but dangerously so.

A new almost-orthodoxy in the academy – the Higher Dismissiveness, in Anthony Gottlieb's nice phrase – maintains that the supposed ideal of honest inquiry, respect for evidence, concern for truth, is an illusion, a smokescreen disguising the operations of power, politics, and rhetoric; and that those of us who feel no need for precautionary scare quotes when we write of truth, fact, knowledge, evidence, etc., are hopelessly naïve. Feminists and multiculturalists who subscribe to this new orthodoxy suggest that in our naïveté we are complicit in sexism and racism; sociologists and rhetoricians of science suspect us of reactionary conformism with the military-industrial complex. Faced with such an intimidating double accusation of naïveté and moral backwardness, many take the ostrich attitude, hoping that if they ignore the Higher Dismissiveness hard enough, it will go away; but I begin to feel – well, rather like the proverbial cannibal among the missionaries.

A thoughtful cannibal will notice, at the heart of the Higher Dismissiveness, a profound unwillingness to accept that the less than perfect is a lot better than nothing at all. Again and again true, fallibilist premises are transmuted into false,

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cynical conclusions: one's judgment of the worth of evidence depends on one's background beliefs, *therefore* there are no objective standards of evidential quality; science isn't sacred, *therefore* it must be a kind of confidence trick; etc., etc. But there's really no need to give up on the objectivity of truth, evidence, etc., provided you're fallibilist enough.

Evidence is complex and ramifying, often confusing, ambiguous, misleading. Think of that meteorite discovered in Antarctica, thought to have come from Mars thousands of years ago, containing what might be fossilized bacteria droppings. Some space scientists think this is evidence of bacterial life on Mars; others, that the bacterial traces might have been picked while the meteorite was in Antarctica; others again, that what look like fossilized bacteria droppings may be merely artifacts of the instrumentation. How do they know that giving off these gases when heated indicates that the meteorite comes from Mars? That the meteorite is about four billion years old? That this is what fossilized bacteria droppings look like? Like crossword entries, reasons ramify in all directions.

How reasonable a crossword entry is depends on how well it is supported by its clue and any already-completed intersecting entries; how reasonable those other entries are, independent of the entry in question; and how much of the crossword has been completed. How justified a belief is, similarly, depends on how well it is supported by experiential evidence and by reasons, i.e., background beliefs; how justified those background beliefs are, independent of the belief in question; and how much of the relevant evidence the evidence includes.

The quality of evidence is objective, though a person's judgment of the quality of evidence depends on his background beliefs. If you and I are working on the same crossword puzzle, but have filled in some long, much-intersected entry differently, you may think a correct intersecting entry must have an 'F' in the middle, while I think it must have a

'D' there. Similarly, if you and I are on the same appointments committee, but you believe in graphology and I think it's bunk, you will think that how the candidate writes his 'g's is relevant to whether he can be trusted, while I scoff at your 'evidence'. Whether it *is* relevant, however, depends on whether graphology is *true*.

Inquiry can be difficult and demanding. Sometimes we don't really want to know the answer badly enough to go to the trouble of finding out; sometimes we really *don't* want to know, and go to a lot of trouble *not* to find out. I think of the detective who doesn't really want to know who committed the crime, only to collect enough evidence to get a conviction; of the academic who cares less about discovering the causes of racial disharmony than about getting a large grant to investigate the matter – and of my own disinclination to rush to the library to find the article that might oblige me to redo months of work.

Other things being equal, inquiry goes better when the will and the intellect work together; but even when we really want to find out, we often fail. Our senses, our imaginations, and our intellects are limited. With ingenuity, we can devise ways of overcoming our natural limitations, from cupping our ears to hear better, through tying knots in rope or cutting notches in sticks to keep count, to highly sophisticated electron microscopes and techniques of computer modelling; but our ingenuity is limited too.

So successful have the natural sciences been that the words 'science' and 'scientific' are often used as all-purpose terms of epistemic praise – as when those TV actors in white coats assure us that new, scientific Wizzo will get clothes even cleaner. But this honorific usage disguises an otherwise obvious fact: not all, or only, scientists are good, honest, thorough, imaginative inquirers. Some scientists are lazy, some incompetent, some unlucky, a few crooked; and plenty of historians, journalists, detectives, etc., are good inquirers.

Science is neither sacred nor a confidence trick. Standards of stronger and weaker evidence, better and worse conducted inquiry, aren't internal to the sciences; nor is there any method exclusive to the sciences and guaranteed to produce true, or probably true, or more nearly true, etc., results. Nevertheless, as human cognitive enterprises go, the natural sciences have been remarkably successful, in part because of the many and various 'helps' they have devised to overcome natural human limitations. Instruments of observation extend sensory reach; models and metaphors stretch imaginative powers; mathematical and statistical techniques enable complex reasoning; and the cooperative and competitive engagement of many people within and across generations permits division of labor and pooling of evidence, and – though very fallibly and imperfectly – helps keep most scientists, most of the time, reasonably honest. Progress in the sciences is ragged and uneven, and each step, like each crossword entry, is fallible and revisable; but each genuine advance potentially enables others, as a robust crossword entry does.

Science, like literature, requires imagination. Scientists, like writers of literature, stretch and amplify the language they inherit: a non-proteinous substance in the nucleus of cells is dubbed 'nuclein', and later comes to be known as 'nucleic acid'; then we have 'deoxyribose nucleic acid', then 'ribonucleic acid', and eventually, almost a century after 'nuclein' was coined, 'transfer RNA', 'messenger RNA', and so on. Scientists, like writers of literature, rely on metaphors: the chaperone molecule, the Spaghetti Hypothesis, the uncles-and-aunts experiments, parental investment, the Invisible Hand. But it doesn't follow that science is indistinguishable from fiction; the distinction between the imaginative and the imaginary remains. Imagination comes first, but appraisal of the likely truth of the imagined conjecture must come after; and if he is successful, the structures, classifications, and laws a scientist imagines are real, and his explanations true.

Just about every inquirer, in the most mundane of everyday inquiries, depends on others – otherwise, each would have to start on his part of the crossword from scratch. Natural-scientific inquiry is the work, cooperative and competitive, of a vast inter-generational community of inquirers; and both the internal organization of science and its external environment can affect how well or how poorly scientific work gets done. As ever more elaborate equipment is needed to make ever more *recherché* observations, scientific work tends to get more expensive; and when only governments and large industrial concerns can afford to support science, when some scientists are tempted to go prematurely to the press, when some find it possible to make fortunes from their work, when the expert-witness business booms, there is no guarantee that mechanisms thus far more or less adequate to sustain intellectual integrity will continue to do so.

Moreover, some of the knowledge the natural sciences have achieved has the potential to cause grave harm. Of course it doesn't follow, as some proponents of the New Cynicism conclude, that it isn't genuine knowledge after all. But difficult moral and political questions about the distribution of resources, the applications of scientific knowledge, etc., cannot responsibly be left to scientists alone to settle. There are no grounds for complacency.

What we take to be legitimate questions sometimes turn out to be flawed, to have no true answer. Sometimes, speaking carelessly, we say that something is true for you, but not for me, meaning that the something – liking chocolate-chip cookie ice-cream, say – is true of you but not of me; or else that you believe whatever-it-is, but I don't. But none of this has any tendency to undermine the objectivity of truth.

A statement or belief is true just in case things are as it represents them to be; so everyone who believes anything, or who asks any question, implicitly acknowledges, even if he explicitly denies, that there is such a thing as truth. Truth is not relative to perspective; and there can't be incompati-

ble truths (this is a tautology, since 'incompatible' means 'can't be jointly true'). To be sure, the many different but compatible truths about the world must somehow fit together; but it doesn't follow that they must all be reducible to a privileged class expressed in the language of physics. Rather, physics supplies a contour map on which the social sciences, history, etc., superimpose road maps – all representing the one, real world.

Incompatible statements can't be jointly true, but incompatible claims are frequently made; what is true is not relative to perspective, but what is accepted as true is. But a dreadful argument ubiquitous in the Higher Dismissiveness confuses what is accepted as true with what is true. From the true, fallibilist premise that what passes for truth, known fact, strong evidence, well-conducted inquiry, etc., is sometimes no such thing, but only what the powerful have managed to get accepted as such, the Passes-For-Fallacy moves to the false, cynical conclusion that the concepts of truth, fact, evidence, etc., are ideological humbug.

When it is stated plainly, the Passes-For-Fallacy is not only obviously invalid, but obviously self-undermining; for if, as the conclusion says, the concepts of truth, evidence, honest inquiry, etc., are ideological humbug, then the premise couldn't be really-and-truly true, nor could we have objectively good evidence, obtained by honest inquiry, that it is so. But when, as shorthand for what is accepted as knowledge, what passes for truth, etc., people write of 'truth', i.e., so-called 'truth', of 'knowledge', i.e., so-called 'knowledge', etc., the scare quotes neutralize the implication of success normally carried by these words; truth must be so, but 'truth' needn't be; knowledge must be true, but 'knowledge' needn't be. The difference between truth and 'truth', knowledge and 'knowledge', etc., begins to blur; and what used to be success-words pick up that characteristic sneering tone: 'known fact' – yeah, right! The idea that there can be incompatible truths begins to sound plausible; and, because it makes sense to talk of what is taken for true, what

is accepted as good evidence, what passes for known fact, only relative to some person or group of people, it will seem that truth, etc., must be subjective or relative.

However, not all proponents of the Higher Dismissiveness are unambiguously relativist; some shift up and back between relativism and tribalism, between denying that it makes sense to think of epistemic standards as objectively better or worse, and claiming that *their* (non-white, non-Western, non-masculinist, non-scientific, etc.) standards are superior – and so duck accusations that their relativism is self-undermining while evading the necessity of explaining what makes their, tribalist epistemic standards better.

Among the most accomplished practitioners of this ducking and weaving is Richard Rorty, thanks to whom the Higher Dismissiveness has come to be associated with pragmatism. Classical pragmatism, however, was fallibilist, not cynical. Here is C. S. Peirce, the founder of pragmatism: 'Out of a contrite fallibilism, combined with a high faith in the reality of knowledge, all my philosophy has always seemed to grow'; and William James, who made pragmatism known: 'Those of us who give up the quest for certitude do not thereby give up the quest or hope of truth itself'. But Rorty, who writes that 'the pragmatist view is of ... "true" as a word which applies to those beliefs on which we are able to agree', and that 'truth is entirely a matter of solidarity', offers an essentially opposite message.

Thanks to such other influential proponents as Sandra Harding, the Higher Dismissiveness has also come to be associated with feminism. But the old feminism, emphasizing the common humanity of women and men, focused on equality, justice, opportunity. 'The fundamental thing is that women are more like men than anything else on earth', wrote Dorothy Sayers, 'they are human beings'; and went on to warn against the 'error of insisting that there is an aggressively "feminist point of view" about everything'. But contemporary academic feminism, turning the sexist stereotypes

that old-fashioned feminists used to deplore into new-fangled 'women's ways of knowing', or demanding 'politically adequate research and scholarship' instead of honest inquiry, offers an essentially opposite message. And in a closely parallel *déravage*, multiculturalism has transmuted from commitment to the admirable goal of mutual learning from cultural diversity into a flabby relativism or an arbitrary tribalism.

And so it has come to be thought that to suppose that there is such a thing as truth, that it is possible to discover the truth by investigation, or that the natural sciences have made many true discoveries, must be to harbor regressive political tendencies. To be sure, excessive confidence that what you take to be true, *is* true, has sometimes served the purposes of sexism and racism; as we fumble our way to the truth, incomplete evidence will sometimes mislead us into accepting hurtful falsehoods; and some of the truths we discover will be unpalatable or painful. But unless it is possible to find out how things really are, it is not possible to discover that racist and sexist stereotypes *are* stereotypes, not truths; nor to trace the roots of racist or sexist prejudices, or figure out how to overcome them; nor to know what changes really would make society better.

As the stress on the interests of this or that class or category of person has waxed, our sense of our common humanity and our appreciation of individual differences has waned, until we are in danger of forgetting that fallible inquiry – the ragged, untidy process of groping for, and sometimes grasping, something of how the world is – is a *human* thing, not a white male thing. This is very sad.

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