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Susan Haack on Twardowski's Refutation of the Relativity of Truth

Polish original of Twardowski's paper "O tak zwanych prawdach względnych" (On so-called Relative Truths) appeared in 1900. Its German, slightly changed, version "Über sogenannte relative Wahrheiten" was published in *Archiv für systematische Philosophie* VIII(1902).¹ Although *Archiv* was a leading German-language philosophical journal, Twardowski's paper did not elicit a special international resonance. On the other hand, the earlier work (1900) certainly became one of the most important philosophical papers in the history of Polish philosophy, particularly in the Lvov-Warsaw School. For example, Twardowski's main arguments against truth-relativism (I will speak about absolutism and relativism instead truth-absolutism and truth-relativism, unless another understanding is explicitly indicated) were repeated by Tadeusz Kotarbiński in his extremely influential textbook *Elements of Theory of Knowledge, Formal Logic and Methodology of Science*, published in 1929.² Izydora Dąmbska used Twardowski's arguments in her discussion whether conventionalism implies relativism (her answer was "not")³. In general, most members of the Lvov-Warsaw School shared absolutism. This was very strongly stressed by Stanisław Leśniewski in one of his earlier papers:

¹ Repr. in *Logischer Rationalismus. Philosophische Schriften der Lemberg-Warschauer Schule*, hrs. von D. Pearce and J. Woleński, Athenäum, Frankfurt a. M. 1988, pp. 38-58.

² For English translation, see T. Kotarbiński, *Gnosiology. The Scientific Approach to the Theory of Knowledge, Formal Logic and the Methodology of Sciences*, Pergamon Press, Oxford 1966; see pp. 109-113 for Kotarbiński's discussion of truth-relativism.

³ I. Dąmbska, „Konwencjonalizm a relatywizm” (Conventionalism and Relativism), *Kwartalnik Filozoficzny* 15(1938), pp. 328-337; Eng. trans. "Conventionalism vs. Relativism" 41(2008), pp. 9-16.

No truth can be created! The need to stress and energetically instill this view in others is growing now that, at the present stage of development of Polish 'philosophy', voices claiming that truths are created are claiming ever more loudly. It is not only the protagonists of all sorts of 'Pragmatism', Humanism', 'Conventionalism', 'Instrumentalism', 'previdionism', etc. that speak of the 'creation of truths', i. e. not only the representatives of these 'philosophical' trends according to whom a judgment 'becomes' true : if it is useful for the preservation of the species; if it assists in predicting reality, etc. That is not only those for whom, like for the Greek sophist Protagoras and the Polish sophist Florian Znaniecki, 'man is the measure of all things' and thus a 'measure' of truth. Slowly, truths begin to become 'created' even by the representatives of that camp which is gathered at the Lvov University around Professor Kazimierz Twardowski, that is, the camp who members have for such a long time believed that a judgment is *always*, absolutely true, i. e. that it is independently of whether it is useful or damaging; whether it helps to forecast the future or not; whether a scholar felt like 'creating' the given truth and he did, or refrained from such 'creation', etc. *No truth can be created!*⁴

Leśniewski alluded in this passage to Kotarbiński, who accepted relativism with respect to (using contemporary terminology) future contingents in his earlier writings, but changed his views later, presumably under Leśniewski's influence.

Susan Haack's comments about Twardowski's criticism of relativism are, at least up to my knowledge, the first reaction in the English-speaking world. Haack raises two issues. Firstly, she points out some defects in Twardowski's arguments, and, secondly, she develops a broader relativist philosophical position, more general, not only concerned the concept of truth. Certainly, Twardowski's picture of relativism was rather narrow. In fact, we did not know exactly who was counted as a relativist by him. Twardowski explicitly refers only to Spencer and his idea that all knowledge is relative and perhaps he also considered Nietzsche as an relativist. Yet it is fairly unclear whether Twardowski was conscious of relativism of James, when he prepared his paper (even in 1902). The quoted passage of Leśniewski's offers a much wider scenario of relativism, probably shared by the Twardowski's circle about 1913 (the year of Leśniewski's paper); Twardowski himself considered James as a relativist in his lectures in epistemology delivered in 1924/1925⁵. However, standard arguments of Twardowski and his students against truth-relativism did not change very much after 1900; in particular, sentences with temporal indexicals were always used as typical examples of relative truths in works of Polish philosophers. Consequently,

⁴ S. Leśniewski, „Is All Truth Only True Eternally or It Is also True without a Beginning”, in S. Leśniewski, *Collected Works*, ed. by S. J. Surma, J. T. Szrednicki, D. I. Barnett and V. F. Rickey, v. I, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht 1992, p. 104 (tr. by S. J. Surma and J. Wójcik); Polish original appeared in 1913.

⁵ K. Twardowski, „Theory of Knowledge. A Lecture Course”, in K. Twardowski, *On Actions Products and Other Topics in Philosophy*, ed. by J. Brandl and J. Woleński, trans. by A. Szylewicz, Rodopi, Amsterdam 1999, pp. 181-239. James' views on truth are analyzed on pp. 222-239, that is, quite extensively. It is known that Twardowski's lectured on epistemological topics in 1917/1918 (and earlier), but there is no documentation that he commented James in his earlier courses.

we cannot consider them as straightforwardly applicable to any advanced pragmatism. Haack concludes at the end of her comments:

[...] the point with which I will conclude for now is that, though an adequate epistemology does indeed require a robust conception of truth, what "robust" means here is simply "not-relativist".

This conclusion suggests that the question whether truth is relative or absolute requires a new setting in epistemology and cannot be reduced to Twardowski's arguments, in particular, to his understanding of relativism as "a single, simple thesis, the thesis that there are relative truths", because truth is considered as "relative to community, theory, culture, etc.". It would be difficult to do not agree with Haack at this point. Certainly, contemporary relativism is a more complex philosophical theory as compared with its account proposed by Polish philosophers, almost entirely generated by Twardowski's paper.

Since my remarks are not intended to a (even) modest realization of the enterprise indicated above as an attempt to discuss "a robust conception of truth" as suitable for contemporary epistemology, I pass to Haack's comments about Twardowski's way in order to refute relativism. At first, I consider Haack's opinion that

he [Twardowski] never actually gives any explicit argument that there are no relative truths; the only arguments he makes explicitly are to the effect that *no judgments are relatively true*".

My assessment is exactly contrary. Twardowski notes very clearly at the very beginning of his paper how he understand some crucial phrases. He writes (p. 147):⁶

The term "a truth" designates a true judgment. Therefore, all judgments that are true, that possess the characteristic of truthfulness, are truths. Hence, it is always possible to use the expression "a true judgment" instead of the term "a truth". It then follows that the expressions "relative truth" and "absolute truth" mean the same as the expressions "relatively true judgment" and "absolutely true judgment".

A simple replacement of "relatively true" by a "a relative truth" in "*A* is relatively true" gives "*A* is a relative truth". Hence, if one asserts that "no judgments are relative true", he or she can equivalently express this statement by "there are no relative truths". Haack seems to strengthen her position by observing that the title of Twardowski's paper uses plural "Truths", but not singular "Truth". However, neglecting Twardowski's quoted explanations, one can maintain that "So-Called" functions as a modifier. Consequently, so-called relative truths are not truths at all.

Clearly, my last remark pertains rather formal or conventional matters than substantial ones. In fact, the assumed equivalence of "relatively true" and "a relative truth" does not seem very important for the issue whether there are relative truths or

⁶ All references to Twardowski's paper are to its English translation in K. Twardowski, "On So-called Relative Truths", in K. Twardowski, *On Actions Products and Other Topics in Philosophy*, ed. by J. Brandl and J. Woleński, trans. by A. Szylewicz, Rodopi, Amsterdam 1999, pp. 147-149.

not. And Haack advances some further arguments which are intended to point out essential difficulties in Twardowski's view. First of all, there is a question of truth-bearers. In Polish text, Twardowski distinguishes *sądy* and *powiedzenia*. Although we can translate the latter by "statements" or "sentences", it remains unclear how to understand the former, rendered as judgments. Twardowski explained that judgments are mental products of judging as an activity. In the subsequent Polish philosophical language it was customary to distinguish *sądy w sensie psychologicznym* and *sądy w sensie logicznym*, that is, expressions eventually translated by "propositions in the psychological sense" and "propositions in the logical sense"; we can also render *sądy w sensie psychologicznym* by "judgments". Now, a more contemporary exposition of Twardowski's arguments could be as follows. Statements (sentences) express propositions (in the logical sense) as genuine bearers of truth. Since some statements are elliptical, for example, when they contain indexicals or vague terms, the same statement can express different propositions. Thus, an apparent reason to maintain that there are relative truths consists in confusing statements with propositions. Briefly speaking, only (some) statements apparently look as relatively true, because they are incomplete, but propositions are always complete and thereby either absolutely true or absolutely false. Since propositions are proper (genuine) truth-bearers, there are no relative truths, but so-called relative-truths; this reasoning exactly shows why "so-called" functions as a modifier. However, as Haack persuasively argues, there is no other way to individuate propositions than by using corresponding statements (sentences). Consequently, the latter seem basic units not only for individuate of propositions but also for assessing whether a given proposition, expressed by a given statement, is complete or completeable at all. An additional difficulty related to the discussed problem is suggested by Haack's considerations in her paper "The Whole Truth and Nothing but the Truth" (reprinted in this volume). If we accept that elliptical factors of language are impossible to fully eliminate them, any chance to extract complete propositions from elliptical statements becomes illusory. This is the main problem for the view that propositions are truth-bearers and it blames all truth-theories based on this assumption, not only Twardowski's account.⁷ I consider the reported analysis of Haack as great achievement in analytic philosophy.

How to meet this difficulty? My suggestion is as follows. The first step consists in adopting Tarski's view (in fact, anticipated by Leśniewski and Łukasiewicz) that sentences interpreted as linguistic unit having meaning by definition, are truth-bearers. Secondly, we consider elliptical sentences as open formulas. For example, the sentence "it is raining now" is understood as "it is raining at t ", where t is a temporal variable; another possibility is to treat "now" as a parameter. Thus, we have a strict parallelism:

⁷ Haack's own theoretical perspective is based on accepting that statements are truth-bearers and introducing the concept of partial truth, but I do not enter into this question.

Twardowski's statements ————— open formulas
 Twardowski's judgments (propositions) ——— sentences (closed formulas).

Furthermore, open formulas can be relatively true, depending of fixing the value of t , but sentences are true or false in the absolute sense. This strategy solves one part of the problem, but its full success depend on the verdict whether indexical (elliptical) features of language can be eliminated. I guess that it is always possible and done much more frequently that it appears for the first sight. Take vagueness and consider an utterance “ a is coming to age”, for example. This sentence does not cause difficulties in many situations, but it is always possible to introduce a regulative definition stipulating, for instance, that such and such age results with coming to age. Such definitions are indispensable in law, because coming to age causes very important facts as, for instance, being eligible for legal responsibility, penal and civil as well. Anyway, the outlined proposal makes possible to rephrase Twardowski's arguments without any recurrence to judgments or propositions.

Maria Kokoszyńska defended Twardowski's arguments against relativism by observing that the predicate “is true” is incomplete.⁸ It can be made complete by invoking some circumstances. More specifically, she offers the following explanation:

(#) a sentence A is relatively true, if it is true accordingly to circumstances C and not- A is true with respect to circumstances C' , provided that $C \neq C'$.

If the stipulation (#) is accepted, we have to do with proper relativism, which can be radical (the relativity concerns all sentences) or moderate (the relativity is restricted to some sentences). On the other hand, improper relativism admits truth (falsity) in some possible world and its negation in another possible world; clearly, C and C' mentioned in (#) occur in the same possible world. According to Kokoszyńska, Twardowski criticized proper relativism and his criticism applies to its radical as well as moderate version. Moreover, she qualified Tarski's semantic conception as absolute in her sense. In fact, Kokoszyńska suggested that absoluteness is the most distinctive feature of the classical (Aristotelian) theory of truth; she even spoke about its identification with the view that truth is absolute and it is interesting that the idea of correspondence is not relevant in this account.

Let me return to Twardowski's criticism. One of his arguments says (p. 161/162) that the relativist (more precisely, the subjective relativist, but I neglect this issue here) does not recognize the principle of contradiction and the principle of excluded middle as the fundamental modes of formal-logical reasoning. However, Twar-

⁸ See M. Kokoszyńska, “Über den absoluten Wahrheitsbegriff und einige andere semantische Begriffe”, *Erkenntnis* 6(1936), pp. (repr. in *Logischer Rationalismus. Philosophische Schriften der Lemberg-Warschauer Schule*, hrs. von D. Pearce and J. Woleński, Athenäum, Frankfurt a. M. 1988, pp. 276-292), M. Kokoszyńska, “What Means a “Relativity” of Truth”, *Studia Philosophica* III(1948), pp. 167-175, M. Kokoszyńska, “A Refutation of the Relativity of Truth”, *Studia Philosophica* IV(1951), pp. 93-149.

dowski's reasoning should be made much more precise. First of all, we should speak about metalogical versions of both principles (Twardowski had no distinction of logic and metalogic). Secondly and more importantly, the relation of a truth-definition to both principles must be explicitly stated. Let the symbols **TD**, **CN** and **EM** refer to a truth-definition, the principle of contradiction and the principle of excluded middle, respectively. Not-recognizing of **CN** and **EM** can be rendered in two ways:

(*) $TD \vdash \neg CN$ (or $\neg EM$);

(**) $\neg(TD \vdash (CN \vee EM))$.

Twardowski attributed (*) to relativists, because he explicitly said that the relativist denies **CN**. This is the view qualified as proper relativism by Kokoszyńska. It is disputable whether (**) implies relativism at all. Since the conjunction of **CN** and **EM** expresses the principle of bivalence, one can rephrase the problem by asking whether bivalence is a necessary condition of absolutism. Take Łukasiewicz's 3-valued logic as an *experimentum crucis*. The bivalence is rejected in this system. Although Łukasiewicz never discussed the absolutism/relativism problem, it seems that he shared the former view. In particular, he apparently identified absolutism with the eternity of truth (what is true remains true for ever). Leśniewski (and Twardowski as well) was more demanding and required that absolute truth is eternal as well as sempiternal (what is true, was always true). This shows that temporal indexing of logical values has far-reaching consequences for the philosophy of truth. Let me incidentally add that Leśniewski (in the paper quoted in note 4) formally proved that eternity and sempiternality are equivalent modulo **CN**. This result seems to have very far-reaching consequences for the philosophy of truth, determinism and indeterminism, but I must leave this question without further comments.

The semantic definition of truth implies the principle of bivalence. Hence, it seems to be absolute. However, the issue is not so simple.⁹ One can ask which of Tarski's definitions, that formulated in 1933 and relating the truth-predicate to a language **L** or that formulated in 1957 defining truth-in-a-model **M**. Haack takes into account the former one and, if I correctly understand her, considers it as neutral with respect to the absolutism/relativism controversy. In my view, the concept of truth-in-a-model is a refinement of Tarski's earlier notion. If we assume, as Tarski did, that semantics concerns interpreted languages, every interpretation generated a model and every model is associated with an interpretation. Since bivalence is entailed by the definition of the truth-in-a-model, Tarski's concept of true is absolute on all standards. If we say that semantic truth is relative to a model, this relativism is improper in Kokoszyńska's sense. This brief discussion shows a philosophical importance

⁹ See J. Woleński "Is Tarski's Conception of Truth Relativistic?", w: *60 Years of Tarski's Definition of Truth*, ed. by B. Twardowski and J. Woleński, Philed, Krakow 1994, pp. 96-112 for a more extensive discussion of this matter.

of Kokoszyńska's distinction and Tarski's construction. Kokoszyńska directly and Tarski indirectly continued the line of thinking about truth originated in Twardowski's paper. Still one view of Haack should be mentioned. She is inclined to apply Tarski's definition to regimented languages only. I am more optimistic about applications of formal semantics to natural language and philosophy.¹⁰ Thus, if this conviction is correct, the problem of whether ordinary truth is absolute or relative can be profitably analyzed by strict logical tools.

¹⁰ See J. Woleński, "Semantic Conception of Truth as a Philosophical Theory", in *The Nature of Truth (If Any)*, ed. by J. Peregrin, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht 1999, pp. 51-66;