~~Epistemology~~:

fragments

David Mertz

Introduction.

Many areas of human affairs lend themselves to two separate types of examination; the one generally superior, the other generally inferior. The second type of examination takes place from our armchairs, and has as its task the discernment of what is essential and necessary to a certain affairs. The first type treats the humans who engage in their myriad affairs in just the same manner as empirical scientists in various areas treat their various subject matter. One such area of human affairs is that concerning itself with knowledge; and since we may speak of nothing herein but of manifest behavior this area of affairs is chiefly circumscribed in and limited to talk about knowledge, particularly the use of the word "knowledge" and its cognates.

Every sentence of this above paragraph is correct, though each is also a provocation. At least the following points need be legitimated herein.

1) That at least some, and hopefully many, areas may be examined in either a "conceptual" or an "empirical" manner -- though these tags for the types of examination are themselves in need of defense.

2) That empirical examination is "generally superior to" conceptual explanation.

3) That "conceptual" examination examines the essential and necessary.

4) That there is a general manner in which ~~in which~~ empirical scientists treat their subject matter -- and further that humans lend themselves to this sort of treatment.

5) That that area of human affairs concerning itself with knowledge may be examined in both of the two manners mentioned above.

6) That we may speak of nothing herein but of manifest behavior.

7) That given the restriction of examination to manifest behavior the area concerning itself with knowledge is chiefly circumscribed in and limited to talk about knowledge.

8) That given the above possibilities, the particular word "knowledge" and its cognates play an interesting role in delimiting the area of interest.

9) That something interesting may be said about the area of human affairs concerning itself with knowledge from the point of view of an empirical

scientist in the human sciences.

Should I show all of these points, I believe I will have done something interesting.

I will not, however, show any of these points systematically, thoroughly, or directly. There is no more than one insight herein, and it may be very easily grasped in a single thought. It is that we act as we do as parts of the institutions which we are inserted into; and that our "epistemic" acts in no way differ from all others in this regard. If one has not this thought already, it may only be gotten by a sort of gestalt switch -- I think there is no accepting my thesis by parts and pieces. All the figures herein, all the tropes, all the devices, all the formulations, merely stand in a perimeter around the thesis and, hopefully, push toward the interior. None of the devices, including that in this introduction, may do more than inspire my thesis in a reader, and all the formulations of the thesis are equally good. I merely hope, and perhaps not vainly, that at least one of the directions from which this essay pushes will be against a weaker force in some reader. My point is, after all, correct; but the ideologies which stand counter to it are mostly neither transparent nor weak.

The field.

Many philosophers take claims, which would be taken by empirical scientists to be perfectly good, though probably false, empirical assertions, to be "conceptually necessary," "a priori," or the like. Similarly, philosophical assertions of contradictoriness or necessary falseness often pertain to claims which empirical scientists would consider empirical, and perhaps even rule TRUE. Further, many empirical scientists, and philosophers doing empirical science, shape their inquiry

to fit in with the pronouncements of necessity made by philosophers.

Some examples are apt here. A philosophical claim is as follows. "In order to make sense of the verbal behavior of a group of speakers we must translate most of their assertions into true ones in our language." A closely related empirical, though probably false, claim is, "Most of the assertions made by group of speakers G are true." Another philosophical claim is, "Action at a distance is impossible/incoherent." A related empirical, and still open, claim is "Gravity acts by means of the transmission of particles (gravitons)." As for empirical scientists unduly influenced by philosophical claims we may cite those neoclassical bourgeois economists who have started with the maxim "Persons are rationally self-interested." If this same claim is treated as up for empirical investigation rather than presupposed, it will probably be judged false.

The claims made by philosophers, of the type mentioned above, often lead to many intricate and interesting discussions; and these discussions are not generally internally inconsistent. We may even grant that these claims are "conceptually necessary," as long as we both keep in mind Durkheim's efforts to deduce the a priori from social structures and realize that "conceptual necessity" does not pertain to the world, but to ourselves. That is, when we say 'P is conceptually necessary' we only say something about ourselves as conceptualizers, or

about the society out of which our conceptions arise, and not about either the proposition P or its possible reference in the world.

An example is again in order. It used to be supposed that Euclidian geometry could be known a priori, and by many it is still so supposed. In the middle of the last century it was noticed that certain small alterations in the usual characterizations of this geometry produced consistent formal systems which did not describe Euclidian space in an obvious way (there are, of course *models* of Euclidian geometry in other geometries). Around the start of this century it started to be suggested that *our very world* might not be Euclidian. We had better note here that Euclidian geometry is not merely a collection of formal axioms, it is a way of conceiving of the actual space we move about in. It may well be that Euclidian geometry is conceptually necessary -- *I* cannot conceive of the world otherwise; if so it does not follow that the world is any particular way, or even that we cannot understand other geometries. Even if Euclidean geometry only became necessary for Europeans around 15ØØ, as is claimed by Patrick Heelan[1], it is no less conceptually necessary for that fact. This lesson should be transferred to all those other claims to conceptual necessity which philosophers make.

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1. Heelan, Patrick: 1983, Space-Perception and the Philosophy of Science, University of California Press, Berkeley.

If claims, though empirically false, may be both conceptually necessary and internally consistent, why do they sometimes fall out of favor? There are several reasons for this. One is that it sometimes happens that the details of a claim become such a bog that persons lose interest in the minutiae of the discussion -- anomalies often underlie this case. In such cases a more interesting, and usually related, problem becomes the focus of attention. Another is that, as it were, a Positive (in Comte's sense) problem replaces the Philosophical problem -- that is the concerns become empirical rather than conceptual.

Still another reason for a claim falling out of favor is that a rising class, or a discipline on the up-and-up, identifies itself with a different claim and different problems. Usually all three of these reasons, and many others, exist simultaneously. I suppose the best example of all of these reasons for a claim falling out of favor is the rapid decline of Medieval philosophy after Galileo. In any case, it is rare that a new paradigm actually shows inconsistencies in an old claim.

I shall argue that philosophers' claims about referentiality have much the same status as do some of the claims mentioned above. If claims such as 'words refer to things' are taken, not as conceptually necessary, but as empirical then they may

The status of TRUTH. (perspectives)

My motivation for wanting to turn philosophical claims about reference into empirical claims is not only a concern with

well be judged false. I try below to describe reference in a way which captures the empirical content of 'words refer to things', but which makes the possibility alien to us. Often it is necessary in the social sciences to try to view a social situation as alien in order to step away from our preconceptions and folk psychology. The "anecdote" I tell attempts to do this.

the status of reference. Rather, my concern is with the social status given to assertions. In particular, I am interested in why certain assertions are lauded as being "true," or as expressing "knowledge." Let me clear about what is of interest here. Philosophers have often interested themselves in the nature, essence or meaning of TRUTH and KNOWLEDGE. This is not my concern here. Partially, this is only a matter of a difference in interest and area of concern -- there is nothing self-contradictory about most philosophical pronouncements about TRUTH and KNOWLEDGE. However, my interest is also in carrying out the goal of Comte's positivism: replacing conceptual questions with empirical ones.

Let me distinguish two senses of explanation, either of which may answer a 'why' question. One sort of explanation provides justification for a state-of-affairs. Excuses, for example, are one sort of justificatory explanation. Another sort of explanation provides causal antecedents and laws which led to a state-of-affairs. Explanations in the first sense are conceptual, those in the second sense are empirical. A philosophical explanation of why given assertions are called true is explanatory in the first sense. The explanation goes either that an assertion is called true because it is true or that an assertion is called true because it meets certain criteria for approximating TRUTH. I wish to outline, in this

paper, an explanation in the second, causal sense of why certain assertions are called true.

Closely related to these two sense of explanation are two "perspectives" on truth: internal and external. The internal perspective sees the truth of a sentence (or utterance) as being a matter of the things to which the words refer and the structure of the sentence. The external perspective does not see anything referential about sentences themselves which makes them true or false; all there are are "external" socio-physical factors which cause particular sentences to be uttered, written, repeated, cited, incorporated in technologies and other institutions, and lauded as true. The internal perspective gives the details of the justificatory answer to the question 'Why are certain assertions called true?' The external perspective is the perspective from which we may give a causal answer to the same question.

Justificatory explanations and causal explanations differ chiefly in focus of interest. However, sometimes it happens that the two types of explanation come into sharp and literal contradiction. One could awkwardly call the justificatory explanations ideological, and the causal explanations scientific. There is a certain sense to this distinction, but I shall not pursue the language -- which I believe leads into quagmire. Let us, however, present an example in which the justificatory/causal distinction could easily divide the supposed ideology/science distinction. In response to the question 'Why is there human suffering?' at least two answers are possible. One is a justificatory one which answers, 'Because of the biblical fall from grace, which is necessary for eventual redemption.' Another is a causal explanation which explains the relation between the human organism and the environment to which it has evolved. There is a contradiction between a literal, historical interpretation of the biblical fall and an explanation of human evolution. Although Kierkegaard might be able to stomach this contradiction, most of us cannot.

Furthermore, the normal reaction to such a contradiction is to accept the causal explanation rather than the justificatory one.

Marx

The move from justificatory explanations of truth to causal ones, and from an internal perspective to an external one, which I wish to make greatly resembles the move made by Marx regarding commodities. The vulgar economists before Marx had what we could call an "internal" perspective on the commodity. They asked, 'What is it about commodities which allow them to circulate?' Marx had an "external" perspective. He asked, 'What is it about circulation which allows certain things to act as commodities?' We may equally well consider this as a difference in the type of explanation given. When we ask the question, 'Why do these particular objects act as commodities?', two types of answers may be given. According to a justificatory answer we may say, 'because they have a use-value/because they are useful.' Clearly this answer is not in terms of causal antecedents, but in terms of purposes -- and this answer insists on reifying the commodity, on finding its nature as commodity within the object itself. Marx's causal, external answer is otherwise; he answers, 'because this object was produced under specific social relations.

Just as it is not anything about an object's internal nature which allows it circulate as a commodity, so it is not anything about an assertion's internal nature which allows it to circulate as a truth. Rather it is the antecedent circumstances of production of an object/an assertion which allow it to act as a commodity/a truth. 'Production' is meant quite literally in the preceding sentence. An assertion is always in the form of a puff of air, or a figure on a surface, or the like -- which is created through the deliberate application of human labor to natural or prefabricated media.

The analogy continues here. In both cases the internal nature of the "object" of concern has a role to play in its circulation; but this role is one other than causal antecedent. What causes an object to serve as a commodity or as a true assertion (where, by this, I only mean an assertion which socially passes as true) is its production in institutionally prescribed ways. However, objects of either type must generally have some inherent quality which allows them to function in their role. A commodity must usually have some immanent usefulness in order to be saleable. An assertion must often serve some purposes in order to be called true.

Let me try to be much more concrete about this dual nature of TRUE assertions -- still on the model of the dual nature of commodities. Perhaps, though, it is better to speak of assertions which manifest KNOWLEDGE than of TRUE assertions. Although these amount to the same thing when we take the external perspective of truth, it is difficult to maintain this external perspective. When I say, for example, that the physicist in my example below makes TRUE assertions using the same words with which I fail to make TRUE assertions, our mind automatically turns to an internal perspective. The reaction is that the two assertions are equally true, even though only one is lauded as TRUE. This is a reversion to an internal perspective, but is a reversion almost impossible to avoid on a preconscious level. When we talk of KNOWLEDGE it is easier to avoid this turn of mind; we feel comfortable saying 'Jones knows X and Smith does not know X, even though they both said X.' However, if we try to remove ourselves from the meanings of what is said and just pay attention to what is said we notice that what someone says is called true in just about the same circumstances it is called KNOWLEDGE. We rarely say to someone,

'What you said is true, although it is not knowledge -- 'rarely', though not 'never' I, admit.[2]

Again, on the dual nature of true assertions. What causally antecedes an assertion being called TRUE or KNOWLEDGE is, as it were, it being uttered in the right kind of "language-game" -- or as part of the right institution. I will try to say below what this "right" kind of game/institution is. However, once an assertion is uttered in this situation it often must still, as it were, "answer to the facts." More precisely, there are noninstitutional/ nonconventional elements which enter into the adhesion of the label TRUE. In some way, many of these elements could be called 'epistemic', but this label tends to distract from really understanding the nonconventional elements which enter into the attribution of TRUTH/KNOWLEDGE.

This dual nature of true assertions is analogous to the dual nature of commodities. What antecedes an object performing a role as a commodity is its production according to the *right* relations of production -- these being those of wage labor and surplus value. As above, there are nonconventional elements which enter into an object's ability to act as commodity. These are the elements of usefulness which an object must usually possess in order to be saleable. Just an object may be produced in the manner of a commodity and yet fail to circulate because of its lack of usefulness, so an assertion may be produced in the manner of a KNOWLEDGE/TRUTH and yet fail to circulate because of its failure to fulfill certain nonconventional conditions.

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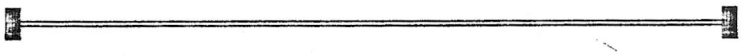
2. A possible confusion arises here -- one which I myself had difficulty avoiding. We do normally say, 'What Jones says is true, although he does not know it.' This sentence is ambiguous. The word 'it' seems on its face to refer to what Jones says. That is, if Jones says X then 'it' might seem to refer to X. However, in general the word 'it' actually refers to the clause 'that what Jones says is true.' When we say the above sentence, what we mean is, 'What Jones says is true, although Jones does not know that what Jones says is true.' We do *not* normally mean, 'What Jones says (call it X) is true, although Jones dos not know X' -- indeed, *this* we would not normally say.

What are the nonconventional elements which enter into an assertion being lauded as true? I have already written that these elements might be called 'epistemic'. However, in order for this label to apply very closely we must have a very particular, pragmatist, "theory" of truth. That is, we must believe that truth is just simply what "works." Pragmatism itself is a complex range of sometimes conflicting opinions on a variety of issues. In particular, at least two distinct, though related, ideas travel under the name 'pragmatism' -- one of which may be utilized by the inquiry of this paper, the other of which is irrelevant to our current inquiry. One of these pragmatist ideas is that science and other areas of knowledge-seeking should concern themselves only with producing useful effects -- though the definition of 'useful effects' may be broader than that implicit in Bentham's utilitarianism. This idea is irrelevant to this paper. Another pragmatist idea is that truth quite simply is what works, i.e. what produces useful effects. Accepting this idea, science in pursuing truth does nothing other than pursue useful effects (though useful effects are not simply ones which increase material standard of living, for a pragmatist -- they may include something like "increasing our appreciation of the simplicity of nature"). In this paper, we do not suppose that the ascription of truth to assertions rests wholly, or even principally, on these assertions ability to produce useful effects. However, to whatever degree nonconventional elements do enter into the ascription of truth, it is nonconventional elements like the pragmatist's "useful effects" rather than the realist's truths.



To illustrate the difference I will give the example which will have already come to the minds of most philosophical readers. This is, phlogiston chemistry and its differences from oxygen chemistry. Nowadays various assertions about oxygen chemistry are lauded as true while no assertion in phlogiston chemistry is given this honor. A pragmatist would probably claim that oxygen chemistry "works" in some way which phlogiston chemistry does not. Clearly this difference is not merely in the technological possibilities opened

by each chemistry; with a different set of ad hoc hypotheses, phlogiston chemistry could be used for all the technological applications for which oxygen chemistry is now used. The way in which oxygen chemistry "works," and phlogiston chemistry does not, perhaps has to do with mathematical simplicity or conceptual beauty, or something similar -- and the difference in "success" is a difference ultimately in the psychological states each can bring about. For a pragmatist of the bent I above declare relevant to this paper, there is a real difference of truth between assertions in oxygen chemistry and those in phlogiston chemistry -- it just happens that this difference in truth is a difference in useful effects (including psychological effects), and not a difference in the way words autonomously (that is, with autonomy from a human knower) refer to the world.

Both pragmatism and realism (the two towering metaphysical positions of the 195Ø's) look at nonconventional elements of truth ascription. Realism takes an entirely internal perspective on truth; pragmatism's position stands ambiguously between the internal and external perspective. The perspective I wish to take is unambiguously external, and I wish to pay attention only to the conventional element of truth ascription than to the nonconventional element. I acknowledge that both conventional and nonconventional elements enter into truth ascription, but the latter have received undue emphasis. I shall illustrate these differences further with, first, a deliberately banal example of KNOWLEDGE/TRUTH ascription and, second, a few more comments on the phlogiston example.

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Let me return to the above phlogiston example. I mentioned that both pragmatism and realism are interested in non-conventional elements in the ascription of truth to assertions. These nonconventional elements underdetermine the ascription of truth to one chemistry but not the other. Either chemistry can be made to fit the nonconventional conditions placed on it by a suitable introduction of ad hoc hypotheses. It may be argued that one chemistry requires fewer, or less arbitrary, ad hoc hypotheses -- but this is not finally determined yet; we do not know all the ad hoc hypotheses that may eventually have to be introduced for either.

> It is perfectly commonplace to assign expertise, and hence truth/knowledge ascriptions, differentially. We are more likely to grant that a TV repairperson KNOWS what is wrong with our TV than we are to grant that a philosopher does. The ascription of truth/knowledge is often born out by the perfectly nonconventional difference in the *success* and *useful effects* brought about by those of different expertise. Often a TV repairperson makes the TV work where a philosopher cannot. However, this is not the whole story. Sometimes neither the TV repairperson nor the philosopher can make the gadget work, though we still say that the former knows what is wrong with it where the latter does not. And again other times both might succeed in making the thing work, though we say that the TV repairperson KNOWS what was wrong while the philosopher's notions on the matter are merely hackneyed and she "got lucky."[a] Clearly there is a conventional, or *institutional,* difference between a TV repairperson and a philosopher which allows the two to "get away with" different assertions -- that is, have different kinds of their assertions pass as true.

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a. I hope the reader will forgive an unnecessary illustration here. Woody Guthrie, in his song "Talking Dust-Bowl Blues," sings a line which always strikes me as humorous. The narration of the song explains about his car breaking down, then the following line is sung, 'A fellow up there, a mechanic fellow said it was *engiiiine* trouble.' Or again, there is Moliere's famous example about the "somniferous nature" of a sleeping potion. These illustrate persons' willingness to offer explanations no matter how little they themselves understand the problem. This, of course, does not mean that these stuffed shirts do not sometimes actually produce useful effects -- but we should certainly wish to say they do so only by accident. The whole humor of the narrations of Guthrie and Moliere lies in the fact that someone else (not we) actually falls for these explanations. Personally, I would like to bring this kind of indictment against many whole professions; for example, doctors who can hardly help but "get it right" once in a while given how often people seek their services.

Clearly, some conventional differences led to the current favor which oxygen chemistry currently enjoys. What are the conventional elements which led to the ascendence of oxygen chemistry over phlogiston chemistry? Unfortunately, my background in this area of scientific history is inadequate to properly answer this specific question.

I will more generally write about the kinds of conventional elements enter into any switch in scientific paradigm. Kuhn, still a fairly traditional epistemologist, understands well the non-epistemic nature of these switches. Younger scientists wishing to set themselves apart from the older generation advance different assertions -- and as inevitably happens, the younger generation outlives the older one, leaving its assertions as the active paradigm. In the sense that paradigms may be incommensurable it makes little sense to speak of the assertions of one paradigm fulfilling nonconventional conditions better than those of the other. The truth of an assertion is always internal to a paradigm, and one paradigm does not fulfill nonconventional conditions better than another but only differently. For example, a mechanistic world view may make for simpler mathematics than an Aristotelian view; but it is accompanied by a loss of any explanation of 'teloi'. This loss is called by Lakatosians as the "Kuhn loss." In point of fact, the transition from Aristotelian to mechanistic world view did not cause more useful effects, but merely different ones. The transition itself was caused by the mechanistic view's association with the rising artisan class. A class, or faction or other group, develops characteristic assertions to set itself apart from other classes. If this class becomes dominant, its ideology (including its assertions) becomes the dominant ideology.

This story of paradigm change might be called a diachronic, conventional explanation of truth ascription. It explains why truth ascriptions change over time. A synchronic explanation should be able to say ahistorically why truth ascriptions (including plain assertions) are made. This synchronic explanation is the final object of interest in this paper. An explanation of truth ascriptions is itself part of a still broader program of determining "a theory of the utterance." The broad program is so broad as to encompass and transcend all the human sciences. In fact, what is demanded is a unified theory of human behavior. Needless to state, this goal exceeds this paper. Let me merely remark on what the former explanation will look like.

In its best version a synchronic explanation of truth ascription is a complete explanation of the physical universe (my possession by Laplace's demon is showing). We cannot give this explanation though, no matter how well we understand the interaction of basic particles, there are just too many of them to go into all the details. The next best version of the explanation sought is a behaviorist account of every possible truth ascriber. The pattern of conditioning of each individual person, each person's physiology, and the stimulus effects of each person's behavior on each other person together determine all social matters, including truth ascription. This explanation also exceed our grasp. The explanation which we shall have to settle for is an account of the large scale, institutional regularities in truth ascription. In lieu of yet presenting the general nature of these regularities, let me mention one ordinary regularity. TV repairpersons' assertions about TV repair are institutionally assumed to be true, while no such assumption is made about philosophers' assertions on the same topic. These assumptions really are institutional; they are not assigned after

weighing the epistemic merits of concrete, particular assertions of particular TV repairpersons and philosophers, but are assumed willy nilly across the whole professions