From the Truth of Facts to the Truth Beyond Objectification
Claudio Ciancio

The value and importance of Marconi’s book for the critique of relativism must be acknowledged even by those, like myself, who endorse a hermeneutic perspective in philosophy. Although many other defenders of hermeneutic thought may disagree with me in this regard, it seems undeniable to me that if there are no “facts” but only “interpretations,” then there are no interpretations either. Yet while our forms of knowledge (and particularly those forms of knowledge which we can properly describe as interpretations) may depend on “facts,” they can also be distinguished from facts themselves. As Aquinas already pointed out: 2cognitum est in cognoscente secundum modum cognoscentis. Unde cuiuslibet cognoscentis cognitio est secundum modum suae naturae.”¹ And something analogous is also suggested by Spinoza’s famous principle: “Ordo et connexio idearum idem est ac ordo et connexio rerum.”²

And again, Kant’s conception of phenomena, whatever other problems it may pose, does not mean that our own knowledge of the facts somehow dissolves the facts themselves, but implies a certain correspondence to the facts through the a priori forms of sensibility and the understanding. For Aquinas, Spinoza, and Kant, therefore, the idea that our comprehension of the facts inevitably transpires in terms of some conceptual framework by no means implies that we should renounce the concept of truth: a description of the facts within a certain conceptual scheme is true when these same facts confirm that truth,³ in a circular process that proceeds from the facts to their description and returns again to the facts. This does not mean that the descrip-

² Th. Aquinas, Summa Theologica, I. q. XII, art. 4.
³ B. Spinoza, Ethics, II, prop.VII.

This is valid in relation to a formalised (or potentially formalised) model of description. But also, as I shall indicate below, this description may be enriched by further aspects which touch upon its relation with the totality or its symbolic implications, aspects with respect to which the procedure of factual verification is not sufficient.
tion expresses the very essence of the facts. In order to speak of truth it suffices that there is a bi-univocal correspondence here.

Hermeneutics presupposes the difference between facts and claims or propositions, but this difference does not really have anything to do with hermeneutics. Two things are required if hermeneutics is to come into play. Firstly, not only must it be the case that the object to be understood is not already immediately clear and thus requires a certain effort in order to decipher it, but also, and above all, that the object in question is inexhaustible in character. And secondly, the process of hermeneutic comprehension is inevitably mediated by the personality of the interpreter. As we have indicated, the recognition that there is no such thing as a perfect identity between the fact and the word (an identity that belongs only to the divine word and is still reflected in the Hebrew term *dabar*) does not imply that “everything is interpretation.” If the description of a fact can be objectified, that is, if it is reducible to a description which can be universally shared (which naturally does not imply that it cannot be developed or reformulated – although this too must transpire in a form that is universally shareable), then we are not dealing with “interpretation.”

Of course, one could contest the validity of this objectifying process and its claims to reveal truth. In reality, far too much rhetoric has probably been expended on objectivism and the alleged dominance of objectifying thought. For objective truth, or the humble truth of the facts, to use Marconi’s own language, is not a falsification of reality, but rather a limited comprehension of the latter, one which becomes false only to the degree that it claims exclusivity for itself. But above all it must be pointed out that interpretation does not require us to abandon the decisive notion of truth in the name of freedom or a plurality of perspectives, but rather demands a broadening of its range and meaning, something which would certainly involve a modification of its “humble” significance, that is, of its claim simply “to tell the facts as they are.”

The proper domain of interpretations is that concerned with questions of a moral, religious, and metaphysical kind. In relation to such questions Marconi maintains what we can only describe as a cautious attitude: while he fully acknowledges the specificity of these questions, he does not go so far as to recognise a specific truth status for them. It is above all moral questions that he explicitly addresses, and his defence of the principle of truth in this domain is particularly effective when he demonstrates the inadequacy of relativism in this connection. In fact, relativism appears intrinsically contradictory since in reducing evaluative choices, whether our own or those of others, to choices of taste it cannot properly be said to offer an account of morality at all: it is incapable “of doing justice to our moral experience, which does not treat questions of value as if they were simply questions of taste.”4 And one must also add that such a reduction of moral choices to questions of taste effectively opens the door to irrationalism and violence. On the one hand, the appeal to individual preferences simply “spares itself the effort of argument,” and on the other, it serves to justify any course of action, and in cases of conflict and disagreement all too easily encourages tyrannical imposition instead of an authentic engagement with and a thorough examination of the issues.

These are claims that any hermeneutic philosophy that has not already renounced the idea of truth can endorse without reservations. From a hermeneutic perspective,

it is precisely the transcendence (rather than the absence) of truth which facilitates, indeed requires, an open-minded consideration of different perspectives, a readiness for argument, and a repudiation of every form of dogmatism or fundamentalism. But for this very reason, contemporary hermeneutic thought would also suggest a different way of characterising this form of truth as truth, one which can present itself in a plurality of formulations without allowing itself to be reduced to any one of them, formulations which themselves, by virtue of this presence, cannot simply be reduced to one another and are capable of recognising one another in turn.

Marconi's cautious approach in this regard, which does not go to the length of recognising a specific kind of truth in these areas, may lead to the suspicion that the only form of truth he accepts is the truth of facts in terms of some formalised description, although he does recognise that our assurance of truth with regard to ethical, philosophical, and religious questions is particularly complex. In this connection I am thinking of passages such as the following: "In these areas there have never been many claims that have been thought to be solidly justified [...] But there is no reason to extend to the concept of truth itself the sense of frustration which has been produced in the past – rightly or wrongly – by philosophical or religious thought, nor to think that the concept of truth is only properly concerned with such areas: the concept of truth is part of our everyday life, and finds itself perfectly at home there." One cannot, of course, criticise an author for what he or she does not say, putting unexpressed intentions on trial as it were, and I cannot therefore properly accuse Marconi of expressly excluding a non-objectivistic concept of truth. But to me it seems extremely important, especially if are to challenge relativism, that we are able to distinguish two forms of truth, the truth of objectification and the truth of interpretation, and to recognise the priority of the latter.

The field addressed by moral questions, for example, is not something that can be understood in purely objective terms since the order of moral experience points to an ontological horizon that precedes and grounds practical reason, to a transcendent horizon. Moral obligation is the manifestation of this horizon which expressly asserts itself in contrast to the prevailing order of the facts. This horizon cannot be objectified since it is a totality which already enfolds us, one from which we emerge, and one to which we are oriented. This implies that any attempt to characterise or articulate this horizon can never furnish an exhaustive description of the latter. For whenever, and however, we articulate this horizon, it remains the condition of possibility of our very attempts to think it. That is why we cannot objectify it, but can only interpret it, must repeatedly attempt to articulate it within the concrete and particular conditions in which we are called to do so.

The non-objectifiable character of moral principles means that their truth is essentially entrusted to the risk of interpretation. But this non-objectifiability should not be regarded as a premise that inevitably leads to relativism. Nor can we justify relativism as a kind of position that would help us to defuse moral conflicts and disagreements. And if relativism does have this effect, this is only because it impoverishes our moral experience. For this experience lives from the tension between the order of fact and another order, one which has the power to make itself felt in its own right and to bear

5 Ibid., p. 153.
the contradictions which it generates precisely because it announces itself as the true order, which is not to say that one can justify its claim to truth in objectivistic terms. But the need to acknowledge and respond to a normative order, the labour of choice and decision, the creative discovery of norms, the sense of guilt, responsibility, and remorse – in short, everything which furnishes the substance of moral experience – can only be justified if the moral order is subject to the majesty of truth.

If objectivity cannot represent the appropriate form of truth in moral questions, even less can it be appropriate for philosophical and religious questions. In questions like these what is at stake is the significance of existence itself, and such significance, again, is not an object, but a horizon which enfolds the whole of our thinking existence, and which cannot be expressed, or said as such, without thereby constantly exceeding the realm of the said. And it is precisely this moment of excess (and not merely the immediate interest we take in our own existence) which implies that the personal dimension of the saying can never be discarded, and thus that, precisely because it is inexhaustible, the originary horizon that enfolds us can be said in infinitely many ways, each of which is defined and made possible by the particular approach of each singular case of thoughtfully responsive existence.

If this understanding of the original horizon – an understanding that is not so much partial as perspectival in character – can itself be true, we shall have to say that the concept of truth is irreducible to the conception of objectivity: the latter is valid only for the facts, for everything that, although accessible only through subjective structures, can nonetheless be objectified, that is to say, can be set out in front of us as something definable and comprehensible without reference or regard to the particular approaches of the singular existing thinker. And we could go even further, and show that the concept of objectifying truth is a perfectly valid, but still insufficient concept of truth: in the first place, because the facts are always given in relation to a totality, and without reference to this totality our knowledge of the facts remains insufficient; in the second place, and above all, because every thing, or interrelationship of things, may appear not only as something which belongs to a closed totality, but as the manifestation of a transcendent principle (and which as such could never be defined exhaustively); in the third place, because one could introduce the distinction between how things are and how they ought to be, and would have to ascribe the character of truth to this latter as the true being of things. These enriched versions of the concept of truth transfer the significance of things as they are simply in themselves to their relationship with other things, with their origin, with their destination.

However, we cannot ignore another question that Marconi’s book raises, at least implicitly, for hermeneutics: is there a non-objective access to truth that does not simply renounce all criteria of rational judgement, or relinquish the universality guaranteed by the notion of objectivity? And even before we ask this question, may we not have to admit that non-objectifiable truth, as all-embracing horizon or as deontological truth (a truth that sustains and inspires the thought of transforming the world, even though this could never exhaustively be defined as a determinate project), is ultimately an illusion? There is no one decisive answer to this objection. We shall have to say, with Pascal, that in the eyes of reason there is a fifty per cent chance that God does not exist, that is, that the world has no meaning and is oriented to no meaning, and that the dilemma can only be resolved with a “wager.” If we now suppose that the idea of
non-objectifiable truth is not an illusion, we must still ask what our mode of access to such truth is, what guarantees or criteria reason can still provide in this connection, since the wager prevents us from appealing to any strict form of universality.

In the first place, we should remember that if the interpretation of non-objectifiable truth is always a personal and perspectival form of knowing, it is not therefore simply a partial view, but a view upon truth as a whole, albeit from a particular perspective, and that it is only for this reason that the view can be considered true. Should we therefore speak not of many truths, as the relativists claim, but of many true interpretations? But then what is the mark of a true interpretation? Apart from the formal marks of possible truth, such as non-contradiction or explanatory power, we must also acknowledge the capacity of an interpretation to enter into a non-conflictual relationship with other perspectives, thus producing a universality which is not the same as uniformity, a universality which is certainly more precarious and problematic than universality in the narrower sense, but also more adequate to truth in its ultimate sense.

This conception of truth counters the objections of relativism and even reverses them by revealing their intrinsic poverty. The truth that reveals itself in interpretation does not in fact require the endorsement of any single formulation, nor even the possibility of translating one formulation into another. In this sense, the hermeneutic approach accepts one of the theses of relativism. But it seems clear, above all, that this approach encourages and grounds the possibility of a non-conflictual relationship between different perspectives. The inexhaustible truth that calls for interpretation is a truth which as such acknowledges the compatibility and potential convergence of other interpretations (that is, of other perspectives on the truth). In this way it becomes the foundation for a respectful dialogue between differences, thereby meeting another demand of relativism, and one that in fact relativism itself merely appears to justify. For in relativism the foundation of dialogue is actually the indifference of all perspectives with respect to truth. But dialogue itself becomes interesting, challenging, and impassioned only because truth itself is in play here. So too the profound and mutual respect that dialogue demands is founded on the acknowledgement of our shared community with truth, and on the fact that our relationship with truth is mediated by freedom. But only a transcendent truth, as such, is a truth that allows us to be free: precisely because it does not allow itself to be objectified, such truth requires the free and creative mediation of the interpreter.

If we consider the source from which it springs, it is clear that relativism is simply the other face of dogmatism and the intolerance associated with the latter. To conclude that if we cannot find an objective, and thus a single, formulation of truth, then there is no truth, or that the truth is in no way accessible to us, is to think in exactly the same way as dogmatism itself. All alleged truths become equally and indifferently admissible, but, in spite of all appearances, one thereby erects a rather feeble bulwark against intolerance. In fact, the latter only draws more strength from the indifference with which different positions have been invested by relativism, an indifference that is justified precisely through the conviction that those positions cannot possibly be rooted in truth. A genuinely dialogical attitude is more than a merely tolerant one: it is born of the conviction that different positions can indeed participate, albeit in a manner that is not immediately obvious, in a shared truth, and that, even if they are false, it is absolutely futile to reject or negate them by force, because the transcendent truth is only accessible, and only reveals itself, through freedom.
We shall thus have to say that if it is important, in contesting relativism, to vindicate “the humble truth of the facts,” it is no less important, and indeed essential, to vindicate the non-objectifiable truth of interpretation (of ethical, religious, and philosophical interpretation). In fact, it is the application of the objectivist model of truth to questions of meaning and significance, and the inevitable dogmatic consequences that flow from this, that proves to be the hidden source of relativism itself.

(Translated from Italian by Nicholas Walker)

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What is Everyday Truth?
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Diego’s Marconi’s Per la verità is one of the best defences that I have read of truth against all sorts of relativist, sceptical and nihilistic views. It manages to combine sophisticated arguments against many versions of what might be called contemporary veriphobia and of relativism with clarity and timely reflections. For someone coming from the French context, it is interesting, but also very depressing, to learn that recent Italian expressions of relativism are very similar to those produced on this side of the Alps by the heirs of Michel Foucault, Bruno Latour and Paul Veyne. Being myself an absolutist about truth, I am reassured that Pascal’s famous “Vérité en deçà des Pyrénées (Alpes), erreur au delà” is not the expression of a deep thought, but of a mere falsity.

Because I agree with about ninety per cent of what Marconi says in this book, the only issue I want to raise is not specific to Marconi’s views; it is a problem for anyone writing against relativist and sceptical views about truth, one which I have myself encountered when dealing with these issues: how can we expect to convince the relativists and to force them to withdraw their views? In many ways, as Husserl said about the psychologism and relativism of his own time, these views are more like diseases, and it seems pointless to give arguments or to try to show where the confusions lie. The only thing one can do is to wait until the disease goes away. Trying to show that the relativist claims are incoherent, wrong, or based on simple confusions is usually met by relativists themselves with a shrugging of their shoulders, because they see our attacks on them merely as the expression of the “culture” of argument and refutation, a culture in which they refuse to participate, and which at best they can tolerate. If one insists that truth is not something that one needs to be afraid of, that it has to be

cultivated as a value, and that one should respect it, one will soon be accused of worshipping a non-existent goddess. The point is well brought out by the nice anecdote recounted by Simon Blackburn in his book *Being Good*.\(^7\) In a forum in which representatives of the great religions of the world held a panel, each one of them speaks for his creed. First the Buddhist talks of the way to tranquillity, to the mastery of desire, to the eightfold paths of enlightenment and the four noble truths, and all the panelists are very appreciative, and say: “Wow, terrific, if that works for you that’s great!”; then the Hindu talks of the cycles of suffering and of successive births and rebirths, the teaching of Krishna and the way to wisdom, and they all say: “Wow, terrific, if that works for you that’s great!” And so on, until the Catholic priest talks about the Fall of Man, the message of Jesus Christ, the promise of salvation and the way to life eternal, and they all say: “Wow, terrific, if that works for you that’s great!” At this point, the Catholic thumps the table and shouts: “No! it’s not a question of whether it works for me! It is the true word of the living God, and if you do not believe it you are all damned to Hell!” And they all say: “Wow, terrific, if that works for you that’s great!” The story is meant to illustrate the kind of impasse that philosophers encounter when they insist that truth, reason, argument and other sorts of rationalistic values and standards have to be defended against their enervation and actual destruction by relativists of all sorts. Callicles, Gorgias and Protagoras these days are not angry with Socrates, and they do not try to ridicule him: they just coolly refrain from arguing with him. According to Blackburn, the panel anecdote shows that we do not add anything to a statement when we say that it is true, and insist further that truth is a standard or value. Like Ramsey, Blackburn believes that there is no more to saying that a statement is true than simply asserting it. Adding the words “And it is true” does not produce anything further than the act of judgement or of assertion. This is what Blackburn calls “Ramsey’s ladder”: by ascending the ladder, one does not actually move up at all. The problem is that if one holds that truth is nothing more than assertion, one advances a perspective that is generally described as deflationist: there is no more to say about truth than that it is a (merely grammatical or logical) device of being able to add or to subtract the phrase it is true that to our assertions. The view also qualifies as quietist, since it insists that truth is not a “grand” metaphysical notion which would call for a substantive definition or a philosophically informed theory. We might even call it “quietistic relativism.” But the problem is that this sort of view also comes close to the relativism to which it purports to answer. For if truth is nothing more than a device of assertion, aren’t our assertions relative to a given practice, situation, kind of justificatory procedure or communal agreement? For if we are not able to evaluate them by saying that they are true, what is left for evaluating them than saying that they are liable to diverse modes of justification, which may not be absolute? This is actually Richard Rorty’s view, when he holds that truth is but a “compliment” that we pay to our assertions when we like them and when we consider that our community agrees on praising them. And this view, although it pretends to withdraw any sort of theoretical commitment, actually comes close to a form of relativism. It becomes very difficult to try to defend the standard of truth in the name of such a minimalist conception.

At the end of his book (pp. 151 ff.) Marconi shows his awareness of the problem, and enjoins us not to “dramatize” the concept of truth. He reminds us that the concept of truth “is part of our everyday life and finds itself perfectly at home there.” He does not, however, suggest that this daily, “humble” and ordinary concept of truth is the deflationist one. On the contrary he insists that the ordinary concept of truth implies that truth and facts are independent of our thought, that truth is distinct from justification. He actually discusses and rejects (p. 78 ff.) a “pleonastic” conception of facts which he finds in Vattimo, according to which the idea of fact does not add anything to our statements, which has some obvious similarities with the deflationist concept of truth advocated by Rorty and others. He is ready to take Tarski’s “disquotational” schema (T) [It is true that P, if, and only if, P] in the most realist sense (pp. 66-67) and to opt for a non epistemic conception of truth according to which truth is distinct from our access to it. He notes rightly, against Rorty (pp. 17-18), that the mere equation of truth and justification cannot lead to an elimination of the concept of truth, but that any talk of justification actually presupposes the very notion of truth. Nevertheless, given that he opts in the end for the thesis that “truth is something quite banal and quotidian in character,” I would like to ask him what sorts of commitments he takes this humble and everyday notion to involve. Would he say, like Wittgenstein, who was a deflationist of sorts, that truth is nothing but the commitment to the equivalence between “it is true that P” and “P”? Probably not, since, as we saw, this comes dangerously close to quietistic relativism. But if not, what sort of further commitments does Marconi take truth to involve? Would it for instance involve a stronger notion of fact and of the truth-maker, such as the one which was defended by Russell in the days of logical atomism and which has in some sense been revived by contemporary philosophers like David Armstrong? Can we rest content with saying that “we all know innumerable truths”? Do we know simply that snow is white, grass is green, that elephants are large, that Prodi lost the election, that Berlusconi got back in again, that Naples is in a mess, and many other truths? Or do we also know something they have in common?

In my view, one of the reasons why deflationism and other minimalist conceptions of truth fail is that there is actually more to truth than the mere equivalence [it is true that P = P]. Truth registers a norm, to the effect that our true statements are objective, factual, independent of our justification. This norm is not a “lightweight” commitment on the part of our assertions, but a strong one. But how are we to conceive this norm? Here again Ramsey’s ladder presents itself. For we might take this norm to be relative to our communities and practices, and say that it registers only relative standards. The question which the relativist might once again address to the absolutist is: how do you know that your norm of truth is not just one of the possible standards? This amounts to another sort of relativism than relativism about truth (the form of relativism which Marconi studies in his book): relativism about justification. He notes that this form of relativism has stronger credentials than other forms, such as relativism about truth and conceptual relativism (although he seems to grant that the latter has some strengths – see. p. 62). But that depends upon what one means by “justification.” At the beginning of his book (pp. 11-13), Marconi usefully distinguishes between three senses of justification:

1) the sense in which we can offer arguments in favor of a view, although the latter may be false;
2) the sense in which we can have good reasons, although defeasible ones, for accepting a proposition;
3) the sense in which our reasons entail the truth of the proposition.

The third and stronger concept, arguably, equates justification with knowledge, since knowledge implies truth. Now, like many other contemporary thinkers (such as Timothy Williamson in particular), I hold that knowledge is the norm of assertion. This means that when one asserts that $P$, one is thereby committed to the claim that one knows that $P$. This view blocks not only any conception of truth which would equate truth and justification in some weaker sense than 3), but also any relativistic view. I would claim, although I cannot argue for it here, that the correct concept of justification is the strongest one, which means that there are not various “standards” of justification, but only those which actually lead to knowledge. This view is obviously opposed to any form of contextualism and relativism with regard to truth and knowledge. But our daily conception of truth and knowledge seems to be contextualist, at least in the sense that we accept that our justifications are relative to certain standards. Diego Marconi (p. 153) seems to admit that this kind of relativism with regard to knowledge is acceptable, because it does not entail relativism with regard to truth. But I would claim that relativism about truth and relativism about knowledge stand or fall together, and I would like to ask him to what extent he would accept a form of relativism with regard to justification.

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In the Name of Truth, Once Again
Paolo Parrini

There is no doubt that years (even decades) have now passed since, in the context of a certain Italian philosophical outlook, any attempt to address the issue of truth or question the claims of relativism was almost regarded as a matter of bad taste. Arguments of this kind were generally considered far too traditional, and far too associated with “absolutist” philosophies of a more or less metaphysical or religious kind, to merit serious consideration by an astute modern philosophical culture, that is, by a secular culture with “its feet on the ground.” I can still clearly remember a conference in Milan on different styles of thought where any attempt to question all that enthusiastic talk regarding the ubiquity of interpretation, the plurality of points of view, and the relativity of truth, would be met with an attitude somewhere between distrust and polite contempt – and that not merely from the postmodernists, hermeneuts, and semiologists, but also on the part of many historians of philosophy, epistemologists, politicians and opinion-makers of various kinds. If anyone ventured to suggest that the endorsement of a certain sceptical historicism, or the uncritical acceptance
of relativism in general, would seem to imply, for example, that the murder of Caius could quite legitimately be attributed to Titus from one point of view, but also to Sempronius from another point of view, he or she would risk being treated as troublemakers who were threatening the democratic foundations of our social life, as dogmatists who were certain of having the truth all sown up, as arrogant and overbearing individuals inspired solely by the desire to impose their own truth on everyone else.

For some years now, things have changed considerably in this respect, and we are currently witnessing the opposite effect. The “veriphobia” of which Alvin I. Goldmann has spoken seems to have significantly diminished, and in a large part of ordinary secular culture these earlier attitudes have been increasingly displaced by an exaltation of “the facts” and “the truth” which, unfortunately, often appears no less superficial than the anti-objectivism of those earlier decades. Sometimes, we are even offered highly fanciful reconstructions of precisely how and when this turn towards a fundamental reassessment of relativism has come about, at least in the context of Italian philosophy, if not in the international philosophical scene. People are now ready to challenge the claim that there are no facts, but then the first thing they do is ignore the rather “hard” data of dates and chronology!

Marconi’s relatively slender volume also belongs – though with much greater intellectual dignity – in the changed environment we have just described. It should be said right away that the author himself presents his book less as a strictly academic investigation concerned with advancing “a new theory of truth” or attempting “a definitive ‘refutation of relativism’” (p. vii), than as an application of numerous conceptual tools that have been fashioned by contemporary analytical philosophy – and above all, I would add, by the philosophy of logic and language (and we shall see the full relevance of this fact at the end of our discussion) – to the task of “introducing a little order” into the contemporary debate by “reminding us of certain distinctions and arguments that are quite familiar, though not exactly to everyone, yet often seem to have been forgotten” (p. viii).

If we take these words seriously, we could say that Marconi has attempted to furnish those who, for the most various of reasons and in the most various of contexts, are directly concerned with issues of objectivity, truth, relativism, pluralism, fundamentalism, and so on, with a “little workshop” of conceptual tools that can serve, philosophically speaking, to “clean up” our approach to arguments that possess an undeniable political, ideological, religious, and social importance for everyone. And in fact Marconi frequently illustrates his own claims by drawing on newspaper articles, the legal judgments and pronouncements of the Constitutional Court, the claims of lawyers and politicians, and the publicly declared positions of religious authorities on various questions. It is this which produces the impression that the book is attempting to offer a range of “neutral,” and relatively unimpeachable, tools with which to construct our discourses with respect to highly topical issues such as secularism, religious and ideological conflicts, cultural differences, the social integration of different groups, and other matters of this kind. And if Marconi often keeps his discourse on a fairly “humble” level (to borrow an expression that the book introduces for a quite different purpose), this is precisely because he wishes to reduce the possibilities of philosophical “friction” to a minimum.

In this respect, however, I am not convinced that the author’s efforts have been rewarded, as a whole, with complete success. In order to explain what I mean, I shall
present a highly schematic exposition of the argument. First, I shall recapitulate the principal claims advanced in the book and comment upon each of them, either individually or in relation to the other accompanying claims. I shall ignore the relationship between relativism and the various types of pluralism, as well as the problem of values (questions that are addressed in the final section of the work), and concentrate instead on the underlying epistemological issues.

(1) Marconi’s first principal claim concerns “the difference between truth and justification”: “A proposition is true if it asserts that things are as they actually are: whatever the Constitutional Court may think, there is no difference between establishing how things are and ascertaining the truth (truth does not inhabit a region that is somehow more sublime than the humble realm of facts). Moreover, the way things are is independent of the fact that we know that this is the way they are. If there are 15232 planets in the universe, it is true that there is just this number of planets, even if we shall never know this. A proposition (for example: ‘There are 15232 planets in the universe’) can be true if we do not have, and never will have, a justification for asserting it. ‘Justified’ and ‘true’ are not synonymous with one another; indeed, one reason why we possess the concept of truth is precisely because it allows us to distinguish between the way things are and the way we think they are, even for the best of reasons” (p. 151).

Apart from a few more specific aspects on which I shall comment briefly in a moment, I agree entirely on this (widely recognised) point: “true” must be clearly distinguished from “justified”: “two assertions can have the same justification conditions without for that reason having the same truth conditions.” But for me, problems begin when we attempt to determine more precisely how the concept of truth is to be understood.

(2) With regard to the concept of truth, I would say that Marconi endorses an emphatically realist conception. In fact, he defends two theses which are intimately connected with one another.

(2a) He tells us more than once that he wishes to endorse what he calls our “realist intuition” about truth (p. 4). Following Barry Stroud, he explains this intuition as the notion that “there is a way things are independently of the fact that anyone knows or ever can know that this is the way they are, and that, therefore, those utterances which assert that things are thus, are true, whether we know this or not; while those utterances which assert that things are not thus, are false (whether we know this or not)” (p. 3 f.). The way things are “is the same for all: the propositions that assert that things are thus, are true, whether we know this or not; while the propositions that assert that things are not thus, are false” (p. 57). As we have seen, this realist intuition is invoked precisely in order to distinguish between truth and justification: “Let us assume that the realist intuition is reliable. If this is so, then to say that a certain assertion is true is not the same as saying that it is justified, that is, that there are good reasons to think that it is true” (p. 8 f).

(2b) The characterisation of truth deployed by Marconi is that “embodied” in the familiar principle behind Tarski’s efforts to define truth: an assertion “a,” or an utterance “u,” is true if, and only if, a or u; the assertion, or the utterance, “snow is white” is true if, and only if, snow is white (I do not distinguish here between an assertion and an utterance). For Marconi “it is possible that there is more to be said about truth, beyond what is expressed in Tarski’s principle (T); but if we use the concept of truth
in a way that does not conform to this principle, then we are not speaking of truth, but of something else” (p. 6).

Now Tarski’s characterisation of truth presents two distinctive features: (i) it seems incontestable on the logical level (and on what possible basis could it be contested? By saying perhaps that the utterance “snow is white” is true if, and only if, snow is not white, or is black, etc.?); (ii) it conforms entirely to our realist intuitions generally, and especially to that realist intuition which treads the “humble” ground of common sense. But the problem which arises here is a different one. Many have maintained (including Tarski himself) that this principle can help us to define, or at least to understand, the concept of truth, but it tells us nothing about the criterion of truth, and thus about how it is possible to distinguish true assertions or utterances from false assertions and utterances. By taking recourse to the notion of justification, we can say that Tarski’s formula and the realist intuition of common sense with which Marconi associates it are incapable of showing us when we are justified in asserting the assertion “a” or the utterance “u,” and thus in asserting the truth of “a” or of “u.” We know, indeed, that “snow is white” is true if, and only if, snow is white; but this does not justify us in asserting, or believing, or supposing that snow is white, any more than it justifies us in asserting, or believing, or supposing that snow is not white, or is green, or red, or any other colour we could mention. Does that mean that Tarski’s work is ultimately useless? Clearly not. We all recognise that his work has furnished and encouraged many significant and outstanding contributions to philosophy, in the logico-mathematical field and the field of formal semantics, in the philosophy of language and the philosophy of interpretation (one need only think of Davidson here). But Tarski’s work does not enable us to find answers to problems in the general theory of knowledge and the philosophy of science that are directly connected with the question of truth.

Marconi is aware of this, and in fact his book includes a discussion of two questions that are closely bound up with the epistemological problematic to which we have just alluded: the question of epistemic justification and the question of conceptual relativism, although he treats the latter question – more than I feel it is really wise to do – as quite distinct from the former. And it is here that we are confronted with the other significant theses that Marconi advances. These theses too are intended to counter relativism with regard to truth, but it appears to me that they are not developed in sufficient detail here.

(3) Marconi claims that “it is not easy to give a precise meaning to the idea of the relativity of truth, that is, to the thesis that a belief or assertion may be true for X but not for Y” (p. 153). In order to indicate his own position, Marconi introduces a distinction between the thesis of the relativity of knowledge and that of the relativity of truth (p. 153). Given that we can characterise knowledge as justified true belief, this distinction does not seem entirely intelligible to me. Considered as a whole, however, Marconi’s approach is clear enough: he is disposed to accept both a form of conceptual relativism and a form of epistemic scepticism, but at the same time contends that these two types of relativism do not imply the relativity of truth. This immediately raises the problem of scepticism and the difference between truth and certainty. The relevant theses are the three which follow:

(3a) For Marconi, conceptual relativism, which can be summed up as the idea that there is “no way that things are, independently of how we describe them; truth
depends on the conceptual scheme that is adopted” (p. 153), does not involve the relativity of truth. Wisely enough, he attempts to demonstrate this point without appealing to Davidson’s famous criticism of “the very idea of a conceptual scheme” (see pp. 57 ff.). I say wisely enough, for two reasons: (i) this criticism is questionable even if one accepts Davidson’s identification of language with conceptual scheme; (ii) there are good reasons for thinking that a conceptual scheme concerns not only the conceptual-linguistic forms that are adopted, but also the theoretical assumptions and epistemic values, along with all the associated methodological rules and principles that we appeal to, from simplicity to compactness, from elegance to familiarity, and so on (I would ask the reader to forgive the brevity of the exposition here; anyone who is interested can find a more detailed presentation of these points in my other writings on the subject). But in fact, for Marconi, these theoretical assumptions and these methodological principles remain untouched by conceptual relativism. Whereas I have treated the theoretical, the methodological, and the conceptual-linguistic components in conjunction as three dimensions of epistemic relativism, Marconi prefers to address the two themes of conceptual relativism and the relativity of epistemic justification quite separately. Here I follow his own way of presenting the issues. This should not affect the questions that I wish to raise in this connection.

I too believe that the relativist who passes straight from the thesis of conceptual relativism (in Marconi’s sense) to the thesis of the relativity of truth “runs too fast.” Of course, without chemistry one would never think that salt is sodium chloride; but the notion that salt is sodium chloride depends on chemistry? That if chemistry had never emerged, salt would not have been sodium chloride? If this conclusion seems implausible, then it is surely better to say that the way things are is rendered accessible by a certain conceptualisation, rather than saying that it depends on a certain conceptualisation” (p. 153 f.).

Both in the present volume (pp. 64-69) and in an article “On the Mind Dependence of Truth,” Marconi has integrated his discussion of conceptual relativism with a critique of the idea (advanced in different ways by Martin Heidegger and Richard Rorty) that truth depends on the mind in the sense that it is intrinsically bound up with mental features such as beliefs and assertions – features that would not exist if there were no beings capable of developing characteristic mental activities such as thinking and believing. And Marconi has shown that we can challenge the positions defended by Heidegger and Rorty without having to endorse a Platonising conception which recognises the existence of strange abstract bearers of truth, such as Fregean propositions. Basically, Marconi wants to show that the thesis of the mind-dependent character of truth derives from the possibility “that Heidegger and Rorty too conflates truth with our access to truth: in a world without minds nothing and no one would have access to any truth whatsoever, but that does not mean that nothing would be true of that world” (p. 69).

For several reasons, I find this point less convincing than other parts of the book. I am not sure whether Marconi can avoid any compromising contact with Platonism, a position which, though certainly realist in character, hardly conforms with the “real-
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(3b) When he refers to the thesis of the relativity of justification (of epistemic relativism, in my terminology), Marconi does not consider the various ways in which contemporary epistemology has sought to demonstrate the validity of this approach (here I am thinking, for example, of the analysis of the problem of empirical verification, of the holistic conception defended by Duhem, of the thesis of the empirical under-determination of our theories, and of the opposite thesis – particularly important to me – of the theoretical over-determination of experience). But Marconi does recognise, albeit somewhat fleetingly, that our “justifications depend upon many things,” which is why it does not seem “wrong to maintain that a proposition can be justified for someone who proceeds from certain premises, but not for someone who rejects those premisses; justified for someone who adopts certain criteria, but not for someone who rejects them” (p. 151).

But Marconi does not restrict himself to endorsing the relativity of justification. He accompanies it with two other claims (3bi and 3bii) which produce a certain internal tension. The first of these claims (3bi) is closely connected with the idea (1) that truth and justification are not the same, and asserts that the relativity of justification does not involve the relativity of truth with respect to the premisses or the criteria of justification that are adopted: “Perhaps Cardinal Bellarmin had a plausible justification for his geocentric beliefs, but this does not imply that those beliefs were true, or true for him but not for Galileo or for us. The relativity of justification does not imply the relativity of truth” (p. 151).

Yet at the same time, Marconi is not prepared to maintain this claim to the point of denying any connection whatsoever between truth and justification. In fact, when he comes to formulate thesis (3bii), he writes as follows: “to say that a belief is justified is to say that there are good reasons [my emphasis] for thinking that it is true. ‘Justified’ is not synonymous with ‘true’ but if one maintains that an assertion is justified, then one thinks that it is true. We cannot distance ourselves from truth by saying that the thesis we uphold is ‘merely’ a justified one: in considering it justified, we are bound to consider it true” (pp. 151 f).

And, speaking of the rules that govern our practices of inquiry and thus of justification, Marconi adds: “It is difficult to imagine that our practices of inquiry could be regarded, for example, merely as a kind of play or ritual, as a specific privilege of certain individuals, as something to which a purely personal value can be ascribed (such as sporting a particular badge or donning a particular kind of jacket). It is more natural to think that practices of inquiry are regulated as they are because it is only in this way that we enjoy a good possibility of determining how things are in a certain
area of inquiry, that is, of determining which of our assertions are true. Truth therefore reappears to justify practices of inquiry which, in and of themselves, can also be described without invoking truth” (pp. 20 f).

(3c) Marconi declares that this last claim does not involve “an exorbitant demand” since truth, at least in many cases, “is something banal and quotidian in character” (p. 152). According to Marconi, we are entirely mistaken if we think that to ascertain the facts is one thing, while to ascertain the truth is something much more demanding and problematic, for “truth does not inhabit some sublime region that is more elevated than the humble realm of the facts: to ascertain that things are in a certain way (‘to ascertain the facts’) is to ascertain that it is true that they are in this way (‘to establish the truth’), and vice versa” (p. 7).

And here we are presented with thesis (3c), by means of which Marconi attempts to dispel the threat of scepticism by distinguishing between knowledge and certainty, and, at the same time, to “de-dramatise” the problem of truth. I cite the relevant passage in full: “all know any number of truths. One who thinks otherwise – one who thinks that we do not know, and never will know, anything at all because knowledge itself is impossible – is what we call a sceptic. Perhaps scepticism cannot be refuted in a strict sense, but it is a feeble position (as Austin and Wittgenstein, amongst others, have shown), and a thoroughly problematic one: it implies, for example, that every scientific article, to be truly convincing, must first provide a demonstration that the author of the article was not in fact dreaming when he conducted his inquiries. If, in order to avoid such difficulties, we reject scepticism, then we think that knowledge is possible: and to say that we know a proposition is to say, amongst other things, that it is true. / In a good deal of contemporary philosophy, and in common discourse as well, truth has been unduly dramatised: it has been envisaged as something supra-human, something that we tirelessly pursue but never reach […] Two things lie at the root of this dramatisation: in the first place, we confuse knowledge with certainty, the possibility of being in error with the fact of being in error. We can always be mistaken, but that does not mean that we are always in error, or even often in error. On the contrary, we have excellent reasons [my emphasis] to think, until shown otherwise, that many of our beliefs are simply true. In the second place, we illegitimately generalise the difficulties that we have always encountered in attempting to acquire true and authentic knowledge in philosophical, ethical, and religious areas. In these fields, there have never been many propositions which have been thought to be solidly justified […] But there is no reason to extend to the concept of truth as such the sense of frustration that has been produced in the past – rightly or wrongly – by philosophical or religious inquiry; nor any reason to think that the concept of truth is only properly concerned with these fields: the concept of truth is part of our everyday life, and finds itself perfectly at home there” (pp. 152 f).

It may be the case – as Marconi claims – that neither conceptual relativism nor epistemic relativism succeeds “in entirely dispelling our realist intuition” (p. 82). But it seems to me that there is a certain internal tension amongst the different theses which Marconi embraces and which I have briefly outlined above. This tension, of course, is supposed to be “dispelled” by showing how the theses can be made compatible with one another as aspects of a single unified vision. To be more precise: if the thesis of the non-relativity of truth is defended – as it is in this book – not only by appeal to the dis-
tinction between truth and justification (thesis 1), but also by appeal to an interpretation of truth which is based on our realist intuition (thesis 2a), then it becomes necessary to show – as this book does not – how this realist intuition is compatible, or could be made compatible, with the marginalising of scepticism (thesis 3c), with conceptual relativism (thesis 3a), and, above all, with epistemic relativism (thesis 3b).

As we have seen, to claim that truth is different from justification and, at the same time, to characterise truth in terms of our realist intuition, implies a recognition that truths (whether they are humble or anything but humble) are “out there,” and are what they are independently of the justificatory practices in which we engage. On what basis, then, can we claim that what we think ourselves justified in regarding as true (since it most fully satisfies the best justificatory practices that we possess) is actually true in the sense indicated by our realist intuition? We could make this claim if we could show, for example, that our justificatory practices also characteristically lead us to discover the truth. But to be able to rely, with good reason, on a connection of this kind, we should have to know what the truths are, so as to determine whether the use and application of those practices does actually lead us to discover them, if not in every case or with absolute certainty, then at least in the majority of cases, and with good margins of probability. But this is just what we cannot do. We do not enjoy any epistemic access to truths that is completely independent of the criteria of justification which we are disposed to consider reliable and thus to employ, whether they be mystical intuition, magical and cabalistic practices, perceptual experience, the principles of reason, methodological maxims, or a combination of any number of such things, applied in a variety of different ways according to the particular questions that we wish to address (deciding on the existence of neutrinos, of a supreme being and creator of heaven and earth, of supernatural forces, or knowing the results of the next lottery draw, or the composition of various natural substances, such as salt for example, and so forth). In short, our realistic intuition tells us that truths are out there, but this intuition, even when combined with Tarski’s definitional principle (thesis 2b), tells us nothing about what these truths are, either in whole or in part. In order to determine the latter question, we must engage in processes of epistemic justification. These processes involve criteria that we may well find satisfactory, but we cannot say whether or not they are effective in discovering truths that, according to the realist assumption, are what they are quite independently of our concepts and criteria.

In considering that it is quite legitimate to move from our best justification for holding certain assertions to be true, to our being justified in thinking, at least until we have evidence to the contrary, that those assertions are indeed true, it seems to me that this time it is Marconi who “runs too fast,” like the relativist before. But what are the arguments for thinking that this transition is valid? Marconi does not ask this question. Certainly, it is difficult to disagree with him when he argues that in general “we live on the basis of the assumption” that our best justified beliefs are for the most part true, and that it is “very difficult to see how we could possibly live in any other way.” (p. 22) But philosophers have often held that there is a problem here which specifically demands their attention, namely that of showing by what right we can sustain this assumption, although they would obviously never dream of asking us to abandon it or live without it. Many thinkers have seen the problem of scepticism
as raising a comparable question of right or justification, without thereby implying
that we should try to live without our most entrenched beliefs or furnish constant
demonstrations of the untenability of sceptical doubt before we make any assertions
whatsoever (or, to cite the example which Marconi likes to repeat ironically, to pro-
vide some proof that we are not dreaming, or are not brains in a vat, before we can
write up an experimental report – see pp. 25-29).

We can accept the idea that the possibility of doubt is not a valid reason for actu-
ally doubting, that we must distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate doubts,
that philosophical doubt, while not perhaps refutable (see pp. 27, 32 f.), should not be
taken seriously “because, in contrast with ordinary doubt, there are no specific motiva-
tions for such doubt, motivations connected with what we have reason to think in a
specific situation” (p. 33). But we are still confronted with the problem of knowing
precisely which presuppositions or which plausible intuitions can assist us to distin-
guish between legitimate and illegitimate doubts, between “reasonable and unreason-
able doubts” (p. 33), and thus between premises of epistemic justification which appear
“plausible” and those which do not (p. 40). The fact that we employ these distinctions
all the time is not in doubt, but the relevant philosophical point is whether we do so
on the basis of presuppositions, and if so, what these presuppositions are and, above
all, what justifies us in accepting them, and in particular whether (in Marconi’s case)
those distinctions can be justified on the basis of, or while firmly endorsing, our realist
intuition. Naturally the problem would not arise if the realist intuition were sufficient
to enable us to discover, either in whole or part, the truths regarding the world. In that
case, we could simply declare illegitimate all those practices of doubt and justification
which do not lead us to the discovery of these truths, or are useless, or downright
disadvantageous, with regard to their discovery, or to our chances of approaching and
identifying them. But as we have seen, this is not the case.

The question that I am raising here is no merely esoteric one. It has been, and still
is, at the centre of many debates in the philosophy of knowledge and the philosophy
of science. For example, the whole Popperian conception of “bold conjectures and
ingenious and severe attempts of refutations” can be seen as a way of responding
to this question. The same could be said of the so-called “no miracle argument”
which has been employed to justify realism as the “best explanation” for the suc-
cessful results of science and of our common sense beliefs. One might also think of
the debate concerning the empirical underdetermination of scientific theories, of the
attempts to establish a connection between our methodological criteria (simplicity,
range of explanatory power, etc.) in the selection of empirically equivalent theories
and the possibility of identifying certain theories that are closer to the truth or are
more probably true than others. Not to speak of the analyses of sceptical doubt, of the
presuppositions of common sense in which we more often put our trust in order to
consider certain doubts absurd or irrelevant, of the relation between experience and
the world of objects endowed with determinate properties and relations (a particu-
larly pertinent example is the “theory of the physical world” defended in Carnap’s
Der logische Aufbau der Welt and subsequently adopted by Quine in support of his
conception of a non-dogmatic empiricism).

On the other hand, if we feel we are authorised – even without confirmation,
on the basis of our realist intuition, of the criteria of epistemic justification which
we employ – to consider the results of the best inquiries we can conduct as true, albeit without claims to certainty, and for as long as we have no evidence to the contrary, then we have ended up, whether we like it or not, framing the application of the notion of truth in terms of the criteria of epistemic justification that have been implicitly or explicitly assumed in the light of those enquiries. We thus run the risk of having to say – with those philosophers, like Rorty, who tend to move from epistemic relativism to relativism with regard to truth – that “only our procedures of justification furnish an effective content to the notion of truth” (p. 63). Starting from the idea that we can know a good number of things because in many cases we can justify our claim to produce true assertions, or to possess true justified beliefs, we end up establishing a connection between our criteria of truth and the notion of truth, a connection which implies that this notion can no longer be characterised exclusively on the basis of our realist intuition.

To conclude. If we allow ourselves to be fundamentally guided by this realist intuition, then we lose all reason to assert that what we feel justified in holding to be true is actually true. And cognitive scepticism thereby acquires a greater force, and in the eyes of some an invincible one (and there are quite a few thinkers who claim that there is an indissoluble connection between metaphysical realism and scepticism). If, on the other hand, we wish to avoid the sceptical conclusion, and maintain that what we feel ourselves justified in holding to be true is indeed, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, effectively true, then this “being true” must be understood in a way that is, at least in part, different from that suggested by our realist intuition. So we either recognise the thesis of epistemic justification and end up admitting that this necessarily involves us in the thesis of the relativity of knowledge and the relativity of truth. Or, while continuing to hold that relativism regarding truth and scepticism regarding knowledge is an unsustainable position, we follow the path of those philosophies which, after Kant, have looked for another way of interpreting the notions of truth, reality, and objectivity by distinguishing between empirical realism and metaphysical realism – a true and authentic “third way” between relativism and metaphysical realism, although it would hardly be feasible to try and explain the precise how and why of such an approach here.

Marconi also claims to be looking for a “third way” (see p. ix), but it seems to me that he does not succeed in presenting it in a fully coherent way because, by neglecting the epistemological dimension of the problem, he restricts himself to juxtaposing the realist intuition with conceptual and epistemic relativism. I would like to explain the ultimate “root” of my critical observations by reference to a thinker who, in his general style of thought and his specific interests (philosophy of language), is very close to Marconi. Donald Davidson has claimed that “it is a mistake to look for an explicit definition or outright reduction of the concept of truth. Truth is one of the clearest and most basic concepts that we have, so it is fruitless to dream of eliminating it in favor of something simpler or more fundamental. Our procedure is rather this: we have asked what the formal properties of the concept are when it is applied to relatively well-understood structures, namely, languages.”

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If we wish, with Marconi, to introduce some order and clarity to the current discourse concerning truth, it would seem imperative to furnish an analysis of those aspects of this concept which relate it not only to “structures that are relatively well understood, such as languages” (which reflect our realist intuition), but also to the theory of knowledge and in particular to the modalities of judgement and epistemic justification in all their inescapable philosophical complexity.

(Translated from Italian by Nicholas Walker)

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