

# Empty Buckets Filled at the River of History: The Values of Truth and Objectivity in Parrini's Positive Philosophy

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## ABSTRACT

One of the most relevant theoretical contributions that Parrini's positive philosophy seeks to make is an account of truth and objectivity that avoids the two extremes of metaphysical realism and deflationism. The goal of this essay is to provide a comprehensive examination of Parrini's philosophical proposal on the topics of truth and objectivity, starting from his early essay "Vero come espressione descrittiva" and up to the works of his maturity. Two aspects are emphasized: on the one hand, the epistemological reasons for Parrini's dissatisfaction with the standard approaches to truth inspired by Tarski's Convention T; on the other hand, the philosophical motives that led him to adopt the view to the effect that truth and objectivity should be understood as empty categories. In the last part of the essay, the axiological dimension of Parrini's account of truth and objectivity is brought to the fore, and its originality in relation to other influential neo-Kantian approaches is highlighted.

Parrini's positive philosophy can be read as an attempt to combine and develop into a consistent epistemological position three main theses, namely, a) empiricism, b) moderate epistemic relativism and c) non-metaphysical objectivity. Within such a theoretical framework, the question arises of how to understand the notions of truth and objectivity. According to standard metaphysical realism, truth and objectivity can be accounted for straightforwardly in terms of the correspondence of the contents of thought to a mind-independent reality. By rejecting the solution made available by metaphysical realism, however, Parrini commits himself to providing a different explication of those notions, which could preserve their evaluative function while, at the same time, acknowledging

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that no God's eye point of view is available from which to compare our assertions with the world.

As Parrini puts it in *Sapere e interpretare* [*Knowing and interpreting*], the problem of truth and objectivity can be framed as that of understanding “[h]ow [we] can avoid a radically relativist position without ignoring all those aspects of cognitive activity that show its dependence on a more or less varied and articulated complex of epistemic conditions” (Parrini, 2002, 97). Indeed, if one argues – as Parrini was ready to do – that the subject's point of view is somehow implicated in every act of knowledge, to the effect that its contribution is constitutively ineliminable<sup>1</sup>, and also insists on the situated character of knowledge (both common sense and scientific), it would seem to follow that truth is to be reduced to agreement, knowledge to justified belief, and epistemology to a form of sociology of consensus-building practices through persuasion. If this is the case, one might wonder whether there is any room for an anti-foundationalist ‘third way’ between “immanent and transcendent conceptions of the object of knowledge” that Parrini – following Giulio Preti<sup>2</sup> – struggled to articulate and defend throughout his entire philosophical career (Lanfredini, 2020; Pace Giannotta, 2020; Lecis, 2013; Uebel 2001).

A philosophical itinerary – it is worth remembering – which began with two articles on Quine – “Lo studio del riferimento in W. V. Quine” [“The Study of Reference in W. V. Quine”], published in “Rivista di filosofia” (1968), followed by “Da Quine a Katz” [“From Quine to Katz”] published in “Rivista di storia della filosofia” (1971) – but which already in 1971 encountered the theme of truth and began to deal with it in a systematic way. In the article “Vero come espressione descrittiva” [“Truth as a Descriptive Phrase”] – I would say Parrini's first genuine theoretical work, in which his philosophical

<sup>1</sup> To make this point, Parrini often refers to Reichenbach and approvingly quotes his statement that “[t]he only path to objective knowledge leads through conscious awareness of the role that subjectivity plays in our methods of research” (Reichenbach, 1958, 37; see Parrini, 1998, 167).

<sup>2</sup> The locus classicus of Preti's views on skepticism is Preti (1974/1993). But see also Preti's early essay on the principle of immanence, which introduces a category – that of immanence – that would also be relevant to Parrini – Preti (1936). Parrini devoted many essays to the discussion of Preti's philosophy: see, in particular, “Preti teorico della conoscenza” [“Preti as a Theorist of Knowledge”], “Preti filosofo dei valori” [“Preti as a Philosopher of Values”], both reprinted in Parrini (2004), and Parrini 2006. On the relationship between Preti and Parrini, see Scarantino (2013).

temperament neatly emerges<sup>3</sup> – we find formulated with great clarity many of the pivotal points of what would later become Parrini’s mature conception of truth and objectivity, namely, the rejection of a performative conception of truth and the Kantian-inspired idea that truth does not add any content to the judgment which is predicated as true.

The aim of this essay is to discuss and analyze, once again, Parrini’s conception of truth and objectivity. Indeed, Parrini’s account of the notions of truth and objectivity has attracted considerable attention from many readers, interpreters, and critics. To give just one notable example, if one takes the table of contents of the volume in honor of Parrini, *A Plea for Balance in Philosophy*, no less than nine contributions (out of thirty-three) have “verità” or “vero” (or its English and Latin translations) in their title and two more present “objectivity” – which in Parrini’s works often recurs in connection with truth. For this reason, I will not pretend to say anything radically new here; yet I hope to shed some new light on this issue by focusing specifically on Parrini’s axiology of truth.<sup>4</sup>

I will proceed as follows. First of all, I will present the central theses on the topic of truth and objectivity that constitute Parrini’s framework of analysis, and I will clarify his reasons of dissatisfaction with the standard Tarski-inspired theories of truth. Then, I will move on to discuss the way Parrini characterizes the idea of truth and objectivity as empty categories, whose content is determined from time to time according to the contexts in which they are used. Finally, in the last section, I will investigate the reasons that led him to reject Cassirer’s neo-Kantian proposal, to which Parrini is philosophically very close in certain respects, and I will try to cash out the philosophical implications of conceiving of truth and objectivity as values.

<sup>3</sup> This is said with no intention to disparage Parrini’s earlier or contemporaneous works, in which the structural link between argumentative and historical reconstruction and theoretical reflection – which would later be made explicit as the conceptual framework within which to understand the relationship between philosophy and the history of philosophy (see, for instance Parrini 2004c, 2004d, 2008a, and 2020) – is already strongly manifested.

<sup>4</sup> One line of investigation that would be worth pursuing is the reconstruction of the various lines of discussion that converge in the volume *A Plea for Balance in Philosophy. Essays in Honour of Paolo Parrini* or that stem from that volume – I am thinking here, in particular, of Dell’Utri’s provocative reading (which emphasizes the aspect of closeness and continuity between Parrini’s position and Rorty’s) that Parrini carefully examines and discusses in his “Esercizi di equilibrio in filosofia” [“Exercises of Balance in Philosophy”] – see Dell’Utri (2013) and Parrini (2016).

## 1. Truth and Justification

Let's begin with an overview of the main theoretical coordinates of Parrini's conception of truth. We have already mentioned the Kantian roots of Parrini's thought. The starting point of Parrini's reflections on truth is the distinction, explicitly drawn from Kant, between the definition of truth, on the one hand, and the criterion or set of criteria by which truth can be identified and distinguished from falsehood, on the other.

When it comes to giving a definition of truth, Parrini points out, the choice is rather obvious and straightforward: truth is to be defined as the agreement of knowledge with its object. The distinctive feature of such a definition is that nothing epistemologically relevant can be derived from it: by simply purporting to state what is commonly acknowledged as the conceptual core of the notion of truth, it provides no support for any substantial epistemological theses that one might be willing to endorse about it.

This point is clearly emphasized in Parrini's long and in-depth discussion of Marconi's book, *Per la verità (In Truth)* (Marconi 2007). Referring to Tarski's convention T, which Marconi assumed to be the minimal insight that every characterization of truth must respect in order to count as a theory (or analysis) of truth – as is well known, Tarski had spoken of an adequacy criterion for any possible theory of truth – Parrini remarks:

Now, Tarski's characterization presents the following two particularities: (i) it does not appear to be logically contestable [...]; and (ii) it conforms entirely to our realist intuition, and above all it conforms to the realist intuition that moves on the "humble" ground of common sense. The problem that opens up here, however, is the following. Many have argued (among them Tarski himself) that this principle can help us define, or at least understand, the concept of truth, but nothing tells us about the criterion of truth, i.e. how it is possible to distinguish true statements or assertions from false statements or assertions (Parrini, 2008b, 481).

From an epistemological point of view, therefore, the convention T is, if not useless, at least empty. As Parrini openly notices, Tarski's characterization of truth does not allow to answer any questions related to the general theory of knowledge or the philosophy of science concerning the issue of truth. Hence, Parrini concludes:

By resorting to the notion of justification, it can be said that the Tarskian

formula and the common-sense realist intuition to which Marconi associates it are unable to tell us when we are justified in asserting the assertion ‘a’ or the sentence ‘c’, and thus in asserting the truth of ‘a’ or ‘c’ (Parrini, 2008b, 481).

In other words, providing an account of the truth of a given piece of knowledge is one thing, clarifying the conditions governing its justification is quite another. There is a structural tension between truth and justification, which Parrini argues must be recognized in its radicality. Of course, we all believe that justification must in some way be linked to truth, otherwise there would be no point, for example, in devoting so much attention to the development and careful selection of our best scientific practices. Nonetheless, no matter how well-founded a justification may be, it cannot be – and should not be – equated with truth since it is always possible, in principle, that our best justified belief turns out to be false. ‘True’ is not – and should not be taken as – synonymous of ‘justified’.

It is useful to develop this point a little further. Parrini rejects the idea of the relativity of *knowledge* to affirm, in its place, the thesis of the relativity of *justification*, which constitutes the ground of his epistemic relativism.<sup>5</sup> Epistemic relativism is the idea that justification depends on the actual conditions in which agents and inquirers operate. Together with conceptual relativism – namely, the idea that how things are depends on the expressive resources with which a given community of agents is endowed, so that truth at least in part depends on the “paradigm” of inquiry adopted<sup>6</sup> – epistemic relativism sets out the problem that any general theory of knowledge must address, i.e., how it is

<sup>5</sup> The reason why Parrini rejects the idea of the relativity of knowledge is because, since knowledge can be characterized – at least, according to the standard epistemological account which Parrini seems not to be interested in challenging (Parrini, 2000, 238) – as justified true belief, saying that knowledge is relative to an epistemic standpoint may cast some doubt on the possibility of recognizing the independence of truth from, and its irreducibility to, any particular standard of justification. In this regard, Parrini explains: “[t]o summarize his position, he [Marconi] introduces a distinction between the thesis of the relativity of knowledge and the thesis of the relativity of truth [...]. Given the possibility of characterizing knowledge as justified true belief, I don’t entirely understand this distinction” (Parrini, 2008b, 482). In other words, Parrini is wary of the idea of the relativity of knowledge precisely because he does not want to relativize truth.

<sup>6</sup> I use the term ‘paradigm’ here to refer to the complex mix of conceptual assumptions, rules, principles of inference, examples that constitute a conceptual framework. On this point, see Parrini (2004e, 265).

possible to continue to use the notion of truth in a distinctive and proper way when we have no access to what is true.

Parrini's argument is very interesting in that it makes a simple, yet powerful attack on the alleged naturalness and simplicity of the realist intuition about truth. He writes:

We have seen that to say that true is different from justified and, at the same time, to characterize truth by relying on our realist intuition is to recognize that truths [...] are out there and are such as they are regardless of the justificatory practices we put in place. On what basis, then, are we entitled to assert that what we *think* we are justified in taking to be true (because it best satisfies the best justificatory practices available to us) *is actually* true in the sense indicated by our realist intuition? We could do so if we could show, for example, that our justificatory practices lead us most of the times to the individuation of truth. But to be able to legitimately rely on such a connection we would first have to know what the truths are, so that we could then ascertain whether our justificatory practices are indeed such as to lead us to the discovery of those truth, if not always and with absolute certainty at least in most cases and with good margins of probability. This, however, is precisely what we cannot do. We do not have epistemic access to truths that is entirely independent of the criteria of justification that we are willing to judge reliable (Parrini, 2008b, 485).

This does not amount to saying – it is worth emphasizing once again – that Tarski's characterization of truth entails or paves the way for a metaphysical account of truth. The opposite is true: Parrini is explicit that we should be very careful not to “get ahead of ourselves” and try to use semantic analyses as a springboard to reach epistemological conclusions. Tarski's convention T does not even support the simple, common-sense realist intuition about truth that many interpreters take as completely unproblematic. Only serious conceptual confusion and ambiguity arise when the definition of truth is taken, more or less consciously, as its criterion – or as implying something on its conditions of asseribility. Indeed, if this step is taken, the door is opened to metaphysical realism and, consequently, to skepticism<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Parrini here is in close continuity with Preti in remarking that metaphysical realism and skepticism go necessarily hand in hand. Indeed, epistemological skepticism arises only when an unbridgeable gap is introduced between subject and object.

Metaphysical realism and skepticism go hand in hand because epistemological skepticism is made possible precisely by the realist assumption that truths are “out there” and that no inquiry – no matter how strongly justified its conclusions may be – can ever be certain of reaching them. Once a cleavage is introduced between truths and our best justificatory practices, they cannot be reconciled: there will always be room for doubt that our best justified beliefs are nonetheless false. If this is the scenario in which our understanding of truth is to be elaborated, Parrini remarks, then the only viable alternative to epistemological skepticism is the collapse of truth on justification. But such a conclusion is a *reductio ad absurdum* of the very premises of the argument. Within this conceptual framework, either we argue that there is an unbridgeable gap between what is true and what is justified, or we accept the conclusion that truth and justification coincide: since both alternatives are unacceptable, an alternative account of truth needs to be elaborated that could provide a solid basis for elaborating a sound general theory of knowledge and a more consistent philosophy of science.

## 2. Truth and Objectivity as Empty Categories

It is with these concerns in mind that Parrini rejects not only the naïve realist account of truth, but also any deflationist or performativist conception of it. For Parrini, contrary to the metaphysical approaches, deflationism is right at least on one specific point: the predicate ‘true’ is not substantive in that it does not add any content whatsoever to the sentence of which it is predicate. Parrini agrees with the deflationists that to say that “‘snow is white’ is true” does not add anything to saying that snow is white: it merely states that the truth conditions of the sentence are satisfied. He disagrees with them, however, in holding that the non-substantiality of the predicate ‘true’ – a thesis that Parrini traces back to the Kantian view of thethetic character of the modality – is perfectly compatible with its *descriptive* character (Oliva, 2015, 468).

When a sentence is said to be true, the person formulating that judgment is *not* simply aiming to express her approval of the sentence. If this were the case, ‘true’ would – once again – coincide with ‘justified’. But we saw above that such an assimilation should be resisted. It would render inconceivable a whole series of epistemic moves that we consider – at least at an intuitive level – to be fully justified (such as, for example, saying: ‘I thought it was true, but I was wrong’). Moreover, it would imply relativistic conclusions that do not seem

derivable from Tarski's Convention T. Finally – and most importantly, I would say – it would be extremely strange and suspicious, from a metaphilosophical perspective, if so much (alethic relativism, the rejection of any normative import of the notion of truth, and, cascading down, epistemic and cognitive relativism) could be legitimately derived from something presented as so uncontroversial, namely, the fact that when we say that something is true we are ready to endorse its content<sup>8</sup>.

Here is what Parrini writes about this point in the 1971 essay “Vero come espressione descrittiva” (but I could have quoted from the introduction to *Il valore della verità* [*The Value of Truth*], which repropose, almost verbatim, the argument formulated in that essay):

to say that a sentence is true is to affirm that it has a certain quality or property, that is, that it satisfies the criterion of truth (however conceived) and is therefore valid in a universal and necessary way; it is to say, in other words, not only that one agrees with what is asserted by affirming the sentence, but also and above all that the semantic content asserted, insofar as it conforms to the canons of truth evaluation, *requires* the agreement of those who judge it (Parrini, 1971, 409; see also Parrini, 2011, 12ff.).

He then adds:

In this perspective, it seems to us that truth can and should be seen as a quality, or, more precisely, *as a certain kind of value* that pertains to a sentence: that value that *makes* our assertion of it *legitimate* and *compels* us to agree with what is asserted in it. In what, then, truth consists even more precisely, i.e. in what the justification for its attribution to sentences consists – whether it is the conformity with a purported “real world”, or with a set of rules immanent to judgmental activity itself, or with what is testified to by forms of experience (more or less privileged), and so on – is a problem whose solution lies in the theory of truth in the traditional sense and not in the dispute over the *status* of ‘true’. It seems certain to us, however, that it concerns a notion incompatible with the performative [esecutiva] conception of truth (Parrini, 1971, 409).

The descriptive character of the predicate true resides, therefore, in the fact that it indicates *a certain kind of value*: everything that is true or is predicated

<sup>8</sup> I think that this is a concern about the nature of philosophical argumentation that Parrini had very clear in mind, as evidenced by the criticism of the abductive arguments in support of realism that he formulated in *Knowledge and Reality* – see Parrini (1998, 127ff.).



to be true shares the *quality* (Parrini chooses here to use the Italian term ‘qualità’) of conforming to the canons of truth and, therefore, of demanding inter-subjective recognition on account of its objective validity.

In the 1971 essay Parrini did not take a stance on the question of the nature of truth. In his later works, however, it was precisely such an issue that would become central and would eventually lead to that peculiar form of non-metaphysical objectivism that characterizes his narrow path – his third way – between realism and anti-realism. In his “Esercizi di equilibrio in filosofia”, the distinctive theses of Parrini’s theory of truth are formulated in the following terms: (a) true and truth are to be understood ‘as unitary and primitive (hence indefinable) categorical notions’ (see also Parrini, 2011, 22); b) “truth and reality are regulatory ideals orienting knowledge towards more and more empirically inclusive (data-rich) and more and more rationally systematic, compact, and coherent syntheses”; c) truth and reality are purely formal and, therefore, entirely empty (Parrini, 2016, 71-72).

The last point is key to understanding the distinctiveness of Parrini’s whole philosophical project, for it defines the nature of the value that truth is. “[T]he notions of objectivity and truth, such as that of good,” he writes in *Sapere e interpretare*, “are transformed into purely formal ideal categories: they become empty buckets that are filled at the river of history” (Parrini, 2002, 99).<sup>9</sup> To say that the notions of truth and reality are empty does not mean that they are devoid of content; rather, it means that all the criteria through which truth is attributed to sentences, within different conceptual schemes and traditions, should not be understood as “rigid defining marks that determine them [truth and reality] content-wise and materially” (Parrini, 2016, 73). On the contrary, they are themselves subject to processes of revision and modification, thanks to which they can take different forms in different contexts, while preserving their formal character. In this way, Parrini argues, (moderate, it goes

<sup>9</sup> The use of the analogy of the values of truth and the good with empty buckets filled at the river of history should be read as a ‘conceptual marker’; that image – which is ultimately derived from Simmel – is used by Parrini to pay homage to and reveal his direct filiation, through the mediation of Preti, from Antonio Banfi’s school. Such a filiation is explicitly claimed in the very first lines of Parrini’s essay “Verità e razionalità in una prospettiva positiva” [“Truth and Rationality in a Positive Perspective”], published in the volume *Filosofi italiani contemporanei* [Contemporary Italian Philosophers] edited by Riconda and Ciancio – see Parrini, (2013, 219). For a brief yet clear analysis of the relationship between Preti and Simmel, see Parrini (2004b, 225). On this point, see also Pace Giannotta (2020).

without saying) epistemic relativism can be accepted and defended without it leading to alethic relativism.

But there is more: other relevant philosophical conclusions can be derived from that thesis. Indeed, the purely formal nature of the category of truth goes hand in hand with translating into a purely functional, and therefore non-metaphysical, notion the common-sense intuition – which, as we saw above, lies at the basis of our realist assumptions about truth – according to which the truth of a sentence necessarily depends on something external and wholly independent of the point of view of the subject formulating and adopting it. As said, Parrini points out that it is not possible to compare and confront our sentences with things in themselves because, in principle, we cannot have any access to the latter that is independent of the conceptual resources that we use to describe them. Nonetheless, it is possible to understand the transcendence of the objects, with respect to any historically determined conceptual framework, in the light of ‘an immanent analysis of knowledge’, which conceives of transcendence as a modality of immanence (Parrini, 1997, 295). The immanent account of the objectual transcendence makes it possible, as Parrini remarks in *Sapere e interpretare*:

to remain faithful to the idea of truth as a *quid* transcending the various specific presuppositional structures that frame cognitive activity from time to time, while at the same time, avoiding conceiving of such transcendence in the metaphysical sense, namely, in terms of an inaccessible correspondence between our cognitive claims and reality per se (Parrini, 2002, 84).

The concept of transcendence – thus reworked and purified of its metaphysical encrustations – acts as a reminder of “the inexhaustibility of the empirical determinations of the object itself, which are potentially infinite” (Parrini, 2011, 156). Accordingly, knowledge – which is assigned the task of filling in the empty categories of truth and reality – is to be conceived as “a work of synthesis of the multiplicity of experience by means of an ever-increasing unifying power” (Parrini, 2011, 157). Truth becomes, therefore, “a unitary regulatory ideal that guides our tension towards conceptual syntheses that are richer and more articulate with respect to the empirical material available and the prospects of unification that are gradually being proposed” (Parrini, 2011, 153).

### 3. The Contingency of Values

We have now outlined the distinctive features of the re-elaboration (in the Herbartian sense<sup>10</sup>) of the notion of truth formulated by Parrini. However, a final conceptual step remains to be taken. Indeed, if this were all that Parrini had to say about truth and objectivity, his views would show so many strong features of continuity with standard neo-Kantian logical idealism – and in particular with Cassirer’s position, as has been pointed out by some interpreters (Borutti 2013; Volpe 2005; see also Parrini, 2011, 155) – that one would wonder whether there is anything genuinely distinctive about his philosophical proposal. But this is not the case. There is, in fact, a relevant difference between Cassirer’s approach – and the substantially equivalent one endorsed by Michael Friedman in *The Dynamics of Reason* (Parrini, 2011, 152) – and that of Parrini.

To clarify this point, it is useful to quote a passage of *Knowledge and Reality* in which Parrini presents Cassirer’s neo-Kantian philosophy of science. He writes:

The one and only reality can only be indicated and defined as the ideal limit of the many changing theories; yet the assumption of this limit is not arbitrary, but inevitable, since only by it is the continuity of experience established (Parrini, 1998, 99).

Parrini believes that the necessity on which Cassirer insists on several occasions – for example, when he emphasizes that the contingent aspects of the judgments formulated by the epistemic agents are eliminated along the cognitive process and they “discove[r] in their place that necessity that is universally the kernel of the concept of the object” (Cassirer, 1953, 187; quoted and discussed in Parrini, 1998, 97) – is an unexpressed residue. According to Parrini, to believe that synthetic a priori principles can be reinterpreted in such a way as to make of them the ultimate logical invariants that generally underlie any determination of the laws of nature is to commit at least three distinct theoretical errors.

Firstly, Cassirer’s argument is tainted with metaphysical realism in that it shares with it the same problematic assumptions. Parrini points out that,

<sup>10</sup> The metaphilosophical importance of the Herbartian notion of elaboration is explicitly acknowledged by Parrini in many of his works. See, in particular, Parrini (2018, Chapter 10).

according to Cassirer's neo-Kantian account of reality, there are ultimate logical invariants towards which our inquiries are directed, but we are unable to indicate, define, and identify these invariants, just as we are unable to say whether we have really grasped things as they are in themselves. What changes is only the nature and origin of what we cannot grasp – logical invariants for Cassirer, reality or things in themselves for metaphysical realists – but not the fact of its transcendence and elusiveness.

Secondly, Cassirer's approach reveals its idealist biases by going so far as to deny the autonomy of experience from theory. The principle of the theoretical overdetermination of experience – which Parrini praises very highly and traces back to Reichenbach – states that there are limits to the ways in which the empirical material can be described by a theory since some empirical data are logically incompatible with some theoretical systems. If the much better-known principle of the empirical underdetermination of theories “guarantees a space for subjectivism and conventionalism”, the principle of the theoretical overdetermination of experience imposes some constraints on the autonomy of choice of scientists (Parrini, 2010, 56). It stipulates that “we must also recognise, in an empiricist spirit”, Parrini observes, “that the presuppositions adopted from time to time depend holistically upon experience, and that they too are uncertain and corrigible” (Parrini, 1998, 112).

Finally, by postulating that the idea of necessity lies at the core of the very concept of reality and objectivity, Cassirer has completely overlooked and neglected the structurally contingent nature of any kind of cognitive activity. This is a point that Parrini emphasizes in *Knowledge and Reality* and in several of his other works, but which finds its clearest formulation in the 2012 essay “Realismi a prescindere” [“Realisms Whatever It Takes”]:

This also opens up the possibility – I would add – that the «dough» that nature is made of (but, for reasons I will mention shortly, I would prefer to speak of *experience*) may turn out to be such that it is *impossible* to construct a complex of concepts and linguistic rules by which to shape it. As has been repeatedly emphasized in the empiricist tradition, and as some devotees of ‘liberalized’ or ‘dynamized’ neo-Kantianism find hard to understand, that experience is of such a nature as to allow us to ‘model’ it is a contingent empirical fact: so far, of course, it has allowed for it, but – Hume *docet* – nothing guarantees that it *must* be so and that it will therefore continue to be so! (Parrini, 2012, 504).

In other words, there is no guarantee whatsoever that a cognitive synthesis of empirical material will succeed: if it does, if the experience actually supports

the synthesis, the inquirer records the fact and synthesizes the material in a broader view. But that there is something in experience that ensures the possibility of knowledge is, again, an unjustified metaphysical assumption.

The acknowledgment of the contingency of the synthetic process of cognitive activity is the single point of deviation – and it is worth stressing that it is an empiricist deviation – that Parrini introduces with respect to the idealist tradition from which he also takes his starting point and with which he agrees on many aspects. It is by no means a slight difference: the acknowledgment of such a contingency is what makes it possible for Parrini to conceive of truth and objectivity as empty categories that are filled with different contents according to the different context in which these categories are used. It is also the reason why Parrini speaks, in *Il valore della verità*, of truth and objectivity as a task and an achievement that, as Preti would say, impose themselves in *praxis*. Truth and objectivity are values that must be chosen and confirmed as guides to action insofar as and until they succeed in constructing new and richer syntheses of the empirical material.

I would like to conclude this essay with a few brief remarks on an issue that – if I am not mistaken – Parrini never explicitly addresses in his writings, although it is quite closely related to the issues we have discussed so far. The question concerns what kind of justification can be given for the thesis that truth is “a unitary regulatory ideal that guides our tension towards richer and more articulate conceptual syntheses with respect to the empirical material available and the prospects of unification gradually proposed” (Parrini, 2011, 153).

Two different senses can be attached to such a problem, which must therefore be carefully distinguished. On the one hand, one can ask why choose truth and objectivity as unitary regulatory ideals. In this sense, the problem concerns the motivations that the subject (or the epistemic community to which it belongs) has for constituting itself as an agent subject to the norms of truth rather than choosing the path of resentment<sup>11</sup>. Relativism and scepticism

<sup>11</sup> I use this term in the sense that Preti, following Scheler and Nietzsche, gives to it. Resentment can thus be defined as a form of axiological hate that gives birth to an inverted morality. I quote from Preti's 1968 essay “Sodoma: democrazia e risentimento” [“Sodom: Democracy and Resentment”]: “Yet resentment, when it is common to an entire social class, generates an inverted morality, a reversal of values. Higher values are denied, lose their value or even (e.g. pride) become faults: lower values (e.g., the vital ones) or the values themselves instrumental to resigna-

would thus become, if one accepts this reading, two of the forms in which alethic and epistemic resentment is articulated. On the other hand, however, one may ask why truth should guide us towards ever richer and more articulate conceptual syntheses instead of directing us towards, for example, grasping events or objects in their irreducible individuality. In short, why the content of value should be precisely that indicated by Parrini and not another. This is the problem I wish to raise.

As said, I don't believe that Parrini ever dealt with such an issue in an extensive and systematic way; nonetheless, it is possible to find in his works some scattered remarks that sketch a plausible answer to the question of why truth is to be understood as "a unitary regulatory ideal that guides our tension towards richer and more articulate conceptual syntheses".

To my knowledge, the clearest formulation of Parrini's answer to this problem can be found in *Knowledge and Reality*. In this book, in the context of a discussion of the points of contact between the positivist tradition and his axiological proposal, Parrini writes:

It is this conviction [the idea that the positive sciences constitute a paradigmatic example of knowledge] that induced me to re-define the notions of truth and objectivity, extrapolating the new characterisation from an *essential* trait of scientific activity (the effort to overcome all relativist cognitive particularisms) [...]. That is, I assign definitional and normative value exclusively to the concept of objectivity and truth which, as analysis shows, actually guides the scientific and cognitive process in its effort towards objectivity and truth. I am almost tempted to say that the philosophical positivity of my proposal lies in the fact that it both keeps itself as close as possible to the data which result from the analysis of the epistemological problem, and it recognises that a defensible philosophical position can be extrapolated from these data only if some of them are 'elevated' to empty regulative ideals (Parrini, 1998, 160-161, italics mine).

tion (e.g. humility, patience, industriousness) instead become the highest values. In short: resentment is a hatred that passes from people to their values - to the personal values of the higher people, first; and subsequently to the whole cosmos of higher values constitutive of the ethical order of the hated noble class. This gives rise to an impoverished morality (reduced, precisely, to the most basic, lowest, easiest values) and mystified, in that those qualities that are instrumental to self-consolation and resignation but are not useful, or at least not essentially inherent to the capacity to live and realize higher values are raised to the status of values" (Preti, 2016, 198).

As is well known, Parrini is always very cautious and suspicious when speaking of essences. And yet, here he indulges in this terminology: he states that an essential connection holds between the rules of scientific activity and the overcoming of any forms of cognitive particularism, that is, any concrete theory formulated at a given time. We can therefore speak of *the* essential aim of scientific activity as the search for general theoretical frameworks that could enlarge the relatively narrower aspect of an experience into a broader one and order available data in a more general account (Parrini, 1998, 150).

The content of the values of truth and objectivity is, therefore, rooted in the contingent structure of our most refined cognitive practices. The scientific enterprise is committed to the overcoming of the one-sidedness and situatedness of any particular inquiry, and the normative content of the values of truth and objectivity derives its justification precisely from the fact that these concepts actually guide our best cognitive activities. Stated in other terms, the choice of the values of truth and objectivity is, at the same time, the choice of the logical and conceptual space that makes scientific activity possible<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> I will not address the following set of questions in this essay, but I think it would be interesting to explore the theoretical soundness of Parrini's appeal to the idea of an essential trait of scientific activity. As I have said, Parrini believes that one of the strengths of his philosophical proposal consists of keeping as close as possible to the norms that guide scientific activity. In this sense, Parrini sides with those philosophers of science – such as Michael Friedman and Philip Kitcher, with their unification accounts of explanation (Friedman 1974 and Kitcher 1981) – who insist on the importance of the function of unification for scientific activity. Now, the emphasis on unification as the essential trait of scientific activity seems a controversial position that can be resisted. The question, then, would be whether an argument could be made that would prove persuasive enough to 'force' us (with all the caution that this expression implies) to change the defining content of the values of truth and objectivity. Faced with a plurality of scientific practices that would no longer carry on "the effort to overcome all relativist cognitive particularisms" but are content to recognize particularism as the ineradicable horizon of any inquiry, would one be prepared to consider the possibility that knowledge does not essentially tend to replace "a relatively narrower aspect of experience by a broader, so that the given data are thereby ordered under a new, *more general point of view*"? (Parrini, 1998, 150). What if the proponents of the disunity of science were right? Would that be enough to compel us to revise and redefine the content of the values of truth and objectivity? Even more radically, is there a real and concrete difference between saying that the content of these values has been changed and saying that we simply reject their normative authority? Can we formulate such a distinction, or do we lack the needed conceptual tools? And can this distinction be traced back to that between meaning change and belief change, which Parrini has tried to preserve, albeit in a relativized form? I leave all these questions open here, in the hope of addressing them in a future essay.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this article I have tried to reconstruct Parrini's views on the notions of truth and objectivity. I have focused on those aspects of his thought that coalesce in his third and narrow way between metaphysical realism and radical skepticism. My aim has been that of showing that Parrini's rejection of any metaphysical account of truth and objectivity does not imply a relapse into a deflationist conception of these categories. On the contrary, truth and objectivity maintain a characteristic descriptive content, which consists in expressing the fulfillment of a certain norm of inquiry: whatever is said to be true shares the quality of being conform to the standards of intersubjective agreement.

The idea that truth and objectivity are norms of inquiry that must be chosen without any metaphysical warrants that the empirical material will continue to support our search for broader and more general syntheses of experience is the ground of Parrini's philosophy of values and his most relevant and lasting contribution to the epistemological debate. The axiological dimension which is constitutive of any cognitive activity consists in recognizing that the values of truth and objectivity can never be completely embodied and instantiated in any particular epistemic configuration: because of the infinite richness of experience, as well as of the infinite creativity of human beings, no complete integration of empirical material into a conceptual framework is possible.

It is on this new, axiological basis that Parrini claims that the fundamental epistemic distinctions – such as that between truth and justification, to name only the most important one – can be redefined and vindicated. Even more importantly, according to Parrini's positive philosophy, it is the self-founding value of truth and objectivity that ultimately grounds the open-ended, self-correcting nature of cognitive and scientific activity: truth and objectivity are tasks pursued by those agents who freely choose to participate in the life of reason.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Pier Luigi Lecis for reading and commenting on an earlier version of this paper. I would also like to thank Silvano Zipoli Caiani, Roberta Lanfredini, Caterina del Sordo, Alberto Peruzzi, and Luca Oliva for helpful comments and critical remarks.



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