

Truth and Fallibilism. **A dubious combination in Robert Nozick's philosophy**

Massimo Dell'Utri

1. *Fallibilism and the philosophical method*

I would like to start with an image. It is a well-known image, perhaps overused, but effective nevertheless. Many authors refer to it – Quine, Putnam, Popper, to name but a few. Robert Nozick – the figure my paper concentrates upon – also uses it. I refer to *Neurath's boat*, the image according to which human beings are like sailors on the open sea, living forever in a boat tossed by the waves, devoid of any possibility to call at a port in order to avail of a dry-dock in which the inevitable damage brought about by the long sea voyage through the waves can be repaired. The sailors can do nothing but try to refit sails and mend broken planks while on the open sea, using just the tools and materials they have at hand. As it is quite clear, the analogy is between the boat and human knowledge, the waves and the experience given by the world, the dock and firm foundations.

As a matter of fact, Neurath's boat is usually put forward to serve anti-foundationalist aims – the idea that there are no firm foundations for human knowledge. A way to add to this anti-foundationalist stance is *fallibilism*, the view according to which we cannot exclude the possibility of error in the procedures which led to our instances of knowledge. Not only are we on the open sea. We cannot avail of parts of the boat which we know to be certain, sure, beyond doubt. Fallibilism, however, is not to be confused with scepticism: we do have the boat, after all, a vessel made of planks we can stand on, that despite their replaceability and doubtability are strong enough to support us.

As I mentioned, Nozick uses this image too. Indeed, Nozick is an anti-foundationalist and a fallibilist. According to him, everything is open to revision, nothing stays fixed. Even the alleged necessary truths can be put into question and, if need be, denied¹. In saying this, he leans on Charles S. Peirce's authority. Every belief may be called into doubt, according to Peirce, on the basis of other beliefs at that moment not actually in doubt; these latter beliefs are a sort of starting point for the human cognitive enterprise, and, from the Peircean point of view, they are beliefs belonging to common

sense². They represent Neurath's boat at the moment of launching – to carry forth our image. In a review of Nozick's last book, *Invariances*, Colin McGinn calls Nozick an “ardent fallibilist”³, and I am quite happy to borrow McGinn adjective and apply it to qualify Nozick's *general* philosophical stance – the coupling of anti-foundationalism and fallibilism.

This ardent fallibilism has a direct bearing on Nozick's philosophical method. Seeing that there are no sure and unalterable foundations, what a philosopher should do, according to him, is open ‘possibilities’ for the investigation, analysis, discussion, but *not* furnishing of (conclusive) proof of the correctness of those very possibilities. This is a typical theme in Nozick's thought from *Philosophical Explanations*, published in 1981, onwards. There he wrote:

Philosophical argument, trying to get someone to believe something whether he wants to believe it or not, is not [...] a nice way to behave toward someone; also, it does not fit the original motivation for studying or entering philosophy. That motivation is puzzlement, curiosity, a desire to understand, not a desire to produce uniformity of belief. Most people do not want to become thought-police. The philosophical goal of explanation rather than proof not only is morally better, it is more in accord with one's philosophical motivation⁴.

There are no ‘knock-down arguments’, conclusive demonstrations, or unequivocal refutations, but interesting and illuminating explanations of how various things are possible, which give substance to a philosophical method consisting of a wide “series of philosophical forays”⁵ aimed at moulding a complex and constantly evolving conceptual structure.

Later on I will say something about Nozick's philosophical method. For the time being, I would like to get back to his ardent fallibilism, and see what the consequences are for philosophy itself. Nozick sums up his fallibilism claiming that “there are no fixed philosophical points”⁶, and gives as examples of alleged ‘philosophical points’ Descartes' *cogito*, the empiricists' sense data, and the rationalists' necessary metaphysical truths. In particular – and it seems to me this is a crucial aspect in Nozick's thought – he claims that “there are no fixed philosophical concepts either”⁷. Concepts like causality, object, belief, desire, space, time, objectivity, truth – the basic categories of philosophical understanding – are all unstable. Each might *disappear* in the future.

This idea is a clear consequence of – if not an evolutionary epistemology – a marked departure in the direction of an evolutionary account of these basic concepts. Three strongly related ideas shape this sort of account. In the

first place, the recognition of the importance of experience in assessing philosophical questions: experience moves and conditions evolution, both in biological and epistemological matters. Secondly, the denial of the *a priori*, resulting, on the one hand, in the denial of 'basic' concepts purported to serve as foundations, and, on the other hand, the claim that "philosophy is not (wholly) an *a priori* discipline"⁸. Finally, the recognition of the importance of the outcomes of science, a recognition which helps to transform philosophical questions in empirically testable factual hypotheses. Nozick's is thus a form of *scientism*, since – even though for him "the transformation of philosophical questions into testable factual hypotheses is not the sole method of philosophy"⁹ – he seems strongly attracted by the appeal of the dictum 'Where philosophy was, there science shall be'¹⁰. And it is also a form of *naturalism*, given that evolution is somehow seen as carrying out the same function in epistemology as it does in biology.

I would now like to analyse what this crucial aspect in Nozick's thought – the absence of fixed philosophical concepts – involves in respect to one of those concepts: the concept of truth. In particular, I shall try to clarify what Nozick's interpretation of this concept is.

2. Interpretations of truth

To begin with, there is something which is actually very striking: notwithstanding the conviction of its possible disappearance – an effect, as we have seen, of ardent fallibilism – truth is a concept which plays a very *central* role in Nozick's thought. It is what explains the success of our cognitive efforts, and – as we shall see – is the chief element in his ingenious theory of knowledge. However, as to Nozick's interpretation of the concept of truth, his seems to be a *non-epistemic* one, i.e. an interpretation according to which the truth-value of our beliefs, propositions, sentences, theories and the like, might not be known.

The interpretations of the concept of truth can be approximately divided into two groups: the non-epistemic and the epistemic. Both are in turn divisible into two further sub-groups: radically non-epistemic and simply non-epistemic, on the one hand, and radically epistemic and simply epistemic, on the other hand. According to a *radically non-epistemic* interpretation, the truth-value our sentences possess *cannot* be known, given that the reach of human cognitive faculties is not so wide and powerful as to 'touch' the world, so to speak, and arrive at reliable descriptions of its various

parts. Between the world and our faculties, in other words, there is a gap which cannot be filled, whatever our efforts at knowledge may be. Hence, the sentences we use in order to try descriptions of states of affairs have a truth-value which *cannot* be known. As perhaps appears clear, it is an interpretation of this kind that constitutes sceptical hypotheses such as those of Descartes' evil genius and the so-called Brains-in-a-vat situation, according to which all human beings are actually not leading the life they think they lead, but are hopelessly kept in a overall deception by a supernatural creature or a mad scientist – or a highly developed computer generation, a scenario recently made popular on the silver screen by the Wachowski brothers' *Matrix* trilogy.

On the other hand, a supporter of a *simply non-epistemic* interpretation of the notion of truth still envisages a gap between human cognitive faculties and the world, but maintains that this gap does not hinder the acquisition of genuine knowledge about the world. Our faculties may reach out to the world, fostering the possibility of knowledge, even though there is no guarantee that this possibility will be actualised. Accordingly, the supporter of this interpretation claims that the truth-values of our sentences *might not* be known.

Epistemic interpretations of truth would have this notion shaped by knowledge. We *can* know the truth-value of our sentences, since we *can* know the many aspects of the world. The difference between the *radically epistemic* interpretation and that which is *simply epistemic* is given by considering knowledge of the truth-value either as 'actual' or 'possible in principle', respectively, so that truth and world find their characterisation either in terms of the best current theories we have, or in terms of the theories we shall formulate in a suitably idealised limit of human inquiry.

Turning back to Nozick, I have claimed that his interpretation of truth would appear non-epistemic, i.e. one which allows for the possibility of knowledge notwithstanding the absence of any principled guarantee to that effect. There is some evidence of this attribution in Nozick's writings. Typically, a non-epistemic notion of truth is tied to the so-called *principle of bivalence*, according to which any sentence is either true or false – and Nozick assumes this principle¹¹. Also, a non-epistemic notion of truth is typically coupled with a metaphysical stance worded in terms of *facts* – and the concept of fact is equally central in Nozick's thought: it is an integral part of the explanations of truth¹² and knowledge¹³. Moreover, a non-epistemic notion of truth is typically a *realist* notion, i.e. a notion that can be collocated within a realist stance in metaphysics and one that tallies with an acknowledgment of the world's 'independence' of knowledge or knowability.

As we shall see below, this is precisely Nozick's case. Finally, a non-epistemic notion is typically coupled with the idea of *correspondence* – another characteristic element of a realist non-epistemic interpretation of truth – and Nozick is a convinced advocate of correspondence. For him truth *is* correspondence: *this* is its 'nature'. Only, he does not try to give a definition of correspondence, and hence of truth. To be sure, he does think this definition possible, but adds that we can have it only at a future time, not now¹⁴.

Before examining what is involved in Nozick's conviction that a definition of correspondence is available only at a future time, I would like to focus just for a moment on his refusal to give such a definition.

3. *Pre-philosophical intuitions and truth*

I think his refusal to define the concept of truth is quite understandable, as this may very well be *impossible*. The concept of truth is probably undefinable, and *a fortiori* the concept of correspondence is likewise undefinable. This should not come as a surprise, since that of truth is but one of the most fundamental concepts we have, together with those such as good, right, cause, belief, knowledge and the like – and what is so fundamental does not have any concept underneath. Now, since Nozick does not give the slightest definition, I would claim that the little he actually says about correspondence is more than *sufficient* – even if unsatisfactory for the subscribers to the theory of correspondence, who want to know what correspondence amounts to (and Nozick is among them). And what does Nozick say about correspondence? "Something about the world makes true statements true"¹⁵. It seems to me that this is correct, sufficient, and nothing but the expression of a *pre-philosophical intuition* speakers have regarding the notion of truth. It is an 'intuition' as far as it comes in a spontaneous, natural, non-reasoned manner out of our ordinary application of the word 'true' (and 'false'), and it is 'pre-philosophical' in so far as it comes before any fully conscious theoretical reasoning – before, for instance, practicing philosophy and exploiting definite interpretative categories. In other terms, in applying the word 'true', speakers feel that truth has somehow to do with the world – in a very broad sense of the word. This feeling, weak as it is, constitutes the *core* of any possible full-blown correspondentist interpretation of the notion of truth, granted that any such definition of truth could be given. As said above, I think that a definition of truth is probably impossible, let alone a

correspondentist definition, and hence I remain close to that core and view it as involving a sort of *minimal correspondence – agreement or accordance –* with reality.

Incidentally, it may perhaps be interesting to note that the pre-philosophical intuition which Nozick voices is the same which Michael Dummett and David Wiggins express. In an essay published in 1959 Dummett claims that:

It is certainly part of the meaning of the word 'true' that if a statement is true, there must be *something* in virtue of which it is true. 'There is something in virtue of which it is true' means: there is something such that if we knew of it we should regard it as a criterion (or at least as a ground) for asserting the statement¹⁶.

As for Wiggins, he seems to echo the quotation from Dummett advancing the conviction according to which:

Unless the content of the belief happens to be something which, from the nature of the case, it is up to me to decide at whim (say 'I'll touch the lamp post'), there must be *something* potentially resistant, and outside the act of judgement itself, upon which the mind can gain purchase and *go forward* in judgement or denial. The assertibility of a judgement cannot consist [...] in the bare fact that the judgement is judged¹⁷.

I take Dummett's and Wiggins' claims to point to the pre-philosophical correspondentist intuition I mentioned above. In an outright natural and minimal way we are inclined to say that what is true is true in virtue of there being something extra-mental and extra-linguistic to which it corresponds.

Minimal as it is, it seems to me that this pre-philosophical intuition is of the greatest importance, since it can be of some help in facing some problems concerning the notion of truth, such as understanding what truth actually is, thereby answering questions such as whether it has a *content* of its own or not. The latter point is harshly denied by the so-called deflationary interpretation of truth. According to this interpretation, the notion in question is completely *empty*, so that it has no explanatory or otherwise normative role towards our linguistic and non-linguistic behaviour. All there is to say about truth regards the multifarious uses of the word 'true', which are in principle reducible to instances of the well-known schema 'It is true that *p* if and only if *p*', substituting for *p* any sentence of our language – or what our favourite bearer of truth is. This amounts to say that the word 'true' only possesses an expressive utility, the only utility which justifies keeping the

word in the language¹⁸ (other philosophers go further and propose the elimination of the word as well, without any loss in the expressive power of the language we speak)¹⁹.

However, where does the importance of the intuition lie? To begin with, we came across the schema 'It is true that p if and only if p ' – let us call it the *truth-equivalence schema*, something very close to the celebrated Tarski's *Convention T*. Now, I surmise that it is this intuition that inspires the schema. Indeed, the p that appears to the right of the clause 'if and only if' would point to the *something* external which, according to the intuition, justifies the use of the word 'true'. This amounts to saying that in a natural and spontaneous manner speakers are implicitly prepared to assent to any instance of the schema put forward by means of a sentence in a concrete context of our linguistic practice, where the right-hand side of the schema presents a bit of the world to which the sentence on the left-hand side is seen to correspond. In this respect, a truth-equivalence, when endorsed, is the explicit counterpart of the above implicit pre-philosophical intuition, so that every instance of the equivalence involves the world from scratch, and qualifies itself as not purely formal but *substantial* – not as a mere logical-syntactical device but a piece of language directly tied to the world. Consequently, truth is a *substantial* notion, a notion which gets its substance from the world, thereby acquiring a sufficient degree of objectivity and normative weight.

From this we could derive a possible criticism to the deflationists. They could be addressed with the charge of failing to realise that the truth-equivalences are grounded on (and entitled by) a substantial notion of truth. The contrary supposition has but the effect of rendering the equivalences mere 'vocalisations', just like a baby, a parrot, or a compact disc – linguistic items 'disconnected from the world'.

4. Nozick and deflationism

To return to Nozick, we may reassume the points covered so far. I have outlined the following points: truth is a central notion in Nozick's thought; his seems to be a non-epistemic conception of truth; he involves the notion of fact together with that of truth; he endows truth with an explicative function toward the success of our actions; he is inclined to interpret truth in terms of correspondence; and he does not however propose a definition. For a definition of truth, one must wait: it is not possible now. Indeed, "a theory

of truth [...] arises closer to the end of inquiry than to its beginning"²⁰, and it may take on up-to-now unthought-of configurations. Now, what would we expect Nozick to say about the deflationary interpretation of truth? Well, I think it is pretty clear from what we said above that he should be a convinced non-deflationist. As a matter of fact, he keeps the deflationists aloof. But he does not develop a 'ruthless' criticism, actually. He simply states that deflationism is "premature"²¹, because – given that the correct theory of truth will be established at a future time owing to empirical reasons – nothing at the moment lets foresee that a non-deflationist illuminating and fully explicative theory of truth has to be excluded. Perhaps experience will eventually reward the deflationist hypothesis, but, being things as they now stand, that hypothesis is premature.

So, Nozick is an avowed anti-deflationist. But let us try to fully appreciate his conviction that a definition of correspondence is available only at a future time. It is a consequence of the claim that truth possesses an empirical nature, which derives, in general, from the idea according to which experience is relevant in assessing philosophical questions – an idea strictly connected to his fallibilism – and, in particular, from the evolutionary approach he seems to pursue in epistemology. In this respect he explicitly draws an analogy between a thesis put forth by Paul and Patricia Churchland regarding the concepts of belief and desire. They maintain that these concepts belong to a wanting and scientifically unacceptable folk psychology, and are therefore doomed to be replaced by the correlative and really explanatory concepts of a future neuroscience²². Likewise, according to Nozick, truth can be seen as belonging to a 'folk epistemology', thus doomed to vanish and make room for a more accurate and scientifically respectable concept. Only, Nozick goes on to say, whichever the concept may be that future empirical investigation will substitute for our current concept of truth, it is likely that this substitute will play the same *role* of truth in connecting our network of new concepts to the way the world is²³, i.e. explaining the success of the network in guiding our actions. Therefore, in a sense, nothing would be lost.

However, it seems to me that, given the evolutionary/naturalistic context in which Nozick tends to put his discourse, it is highly unlikely that this will be the case. Rather, what is going to happen is that which is maintained by two other philosophers who foster a Darwinian perspective in epistemology: Thomas Kuhn and Richard Rorty. In Kuhn's celebrated work *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* it is possible to read statements such as:

the entire process [of the development of scientific ideas] may have occurred, as we now suppose biologically evolution did,

without benefit of a set goal, a permanent fixed scientific truth, of which each stage in the development of scientific knowledge is a better exemplar²⁴.

In the same vein, Rorty maintains that

My sense of 'Darwinian' has nothing to do either with the notion of truth tracking or with that of arriving at some goal Nature has set for us²⁵.

Therefore, within a Darwinian outlook we have the *death* of truth, so to speak – not only the death of our current concept of truth, but the death of truth *tout court*. It is nature which 'decides' philosophical questions, and in so doing leaves no room for a human setting of norms and values, no room – in our case – for a normative role of truth such as that of discriminating correct uses of language from incorrect ones. It is not truth that 'explains', for example, the success of our conceptual system; it is only that the system reveals itself as a good adaptation to the environment. Rorty, in fact, accordingly subscribes to a deflationary position regarding truth, and claims that truth has no substance, let alone an 'explicative' one²⁶.

So, in spite of Nozick's starting convictions, the outcome of his reflection seems to force him towards a deflationary perspective about truth – a perspective which contradicts and shoots down those very convictions. And this in turn shows that Nozick's overall philosophical position begins to crumble, since a full and substantial notion of truth is *essential* to the general functioning of that position. To be sure, it would be extremely unfair toward Nozick to conclude that his philosophy does not work, as we have not analysed other important elements of that philosophy, such as his theory of knowledge, for instance. Still, I cannot help observing a sort of *tension* between, on the one hand, a substantial and normative notion of truth, and, on the other hand, a tendency towards a scientific non-normative philosophical account of an evolutionary type, triggered by his ardent fallibilism, which makes him fairly close to deflationism.

Now, a similar tension could also persist, leaving perhaps the system as a whole undisturbed, at least so long as one gets some grounds for detecting an inconsistency in the non-epistemic notion of truth – the hinge of Nozick's system. Is this what would happen in the present case? In order to look for an answer, let us briefly examine Nozick's theory of knowledge – the well-known tracking-of-truth account.

5. Nozick and the possibility of knowledge

As many proposals at explaining knowledge propounded in the last decades of the 20th century, Nozick's theory of knowledge arises in the wake of Edmund Gettier's 1963 celebrated result, a result which seriously undermined the traditional analysis of knowledge²⁷. Indeed, if traditionally – i.e. at least since the time of Plato – any genuine piece of knowledge was defined as being something satisfying the three conditions of being a *belief*, being *true*, and being *justified*, Gettier showed how someone could have beliefs which are true and justified but that nevertheless we would not classify as knowledge – owing to some intuitions of ours regarding what *is* a genuine piece of knowledge²⁸. The moral Nozick draws from this is that knowledge has not to do in an essential way with justification, and therefore one ought to replace the third condition. His recipe consists of replacing the justification condition with two other conditions, which a purported piece of knowledge – say, a subject *S*'s belief that *p* – must satisfy if it has to be declared knowledge at all. The first condition – actually the third one, as Nozick obviously accepts condition 1 and condition 2 of the traditional analysis – is a claim to the effect that: *S* knows that *p* when if *p* were false, then *S* would not believe that *p*, whereas the second condition is a claim to the effect that: *S* knows that *p* when if *p* were true, then *S* would believe that *p*.

These two supplementary conditions are meant to express the *sensitivity* of a subject's beliefs to the truth or falsity of a proposition, where the idea is that only beliefs which are 'sensitive' in this sense constitute knowledge. Their verbal form is not in the indicative, but in the *subjunctive*, given that Nozick assigns them the aim to refer not only to what *is* the case, but also what *might be* the case – given certain conditions. According to Nozick, “no more than an intuitive understanding of subjunctives”²⁹ is required, and tries to put them in the jargon of 'possible worlds': *p* is a genuine piece of knowledge if it remains such in other possible worlds as well³⁰. Thus, *S* knows that *p* if (a) *S* believes that *p* when *p* is true, (b) *S* wouldn't believe that *p* when *p* is false, and (c) *S* would believe that *p* when *p* is true. In brief, *S* knows that *p* when “he not only actually has a true belief, he subjunctively has one”³¹. When his belief that *p* is subjunctively connected to the fact that *p*. When his belief that *p* 'tracks' the truth that *p*. Knowledge, Nozick states, is “a specific real factual connection to the world: tracking it”³². A correspondence with a fact, we may add.

Nozick adds a certain amount of 'refinements and epicycles' to his account of knowledge, but, although very sketchy, what I said may suffice as

a broad outline and we will not deal with them. That broad outline has it that knowledge consists of a specific connection to the world, a special sensitivity of beliefs towards the facts in the world which makes them 'co-vary' with those facts. Now I would like to pause upon the image of the world that this account offers. What kind of world is it, from a metaphysical point of view?

It is a world "that exists independently of us"³³, a world toward which we have no 'guarantee' of knowledge, a world so cognitively distant from us that between the world and ourselves there could be a 'gap', a world in which not only are facts external and independent, but also the very connection to the facts, i.e. the tracking relation, is external and independent, so that that connection may well be beyond our ken. Nozick actually says that the "tracking linkage *is* out of our ken"³⁴. This is a typical expression of what is called *externalism* in the literature about the theory of knowledge. Externalism is the point of view according to which what makes a subject's belief a case of knowledge is beyond the subject's recognitional capacity, so that one can have genuine knowledge without being able to say that it *is* in fact a knowledge. It is as if externalism presupposed a distinction between the cognitive subject and an external subject. It is the latter who would be able to see and report how things really are. But who is this subject? Externalism seems to require a sort of 'God's Eye View' to express it in full. And I would argue that it finds its rationale in a non-epistemic conception of truth. In fact, the image of reality issuing from Nozick's account of knowledge is simply that which a non-epistemic conception would suggest. It is an image from which it follows that the tracking relation, the facts in the world, and the truth-value of our beliefs might all not be known. And this is not without consequences.

In particular, we have what I would call a 'para-paradoxical result'. This is the result of thinking – as Nozick does – that it is perfectly legitimate to claim "I *know* I am now in Sassari" and "I *do not know* I am not a brain in a vat" at the same time. I hinted that it is not a paradox, but only a *para*-paradox, because it seems possible to give an explanation of such a startling combination. Nozick's own explanation is based on *indiscriminability*: if I were a brain in a vat, then I would not notice it, because everything would appear to me identical to a normal situation. Since in both situations my beliefs and experiences would be the same, I cannot know whether I am in the brain-in-a-vat situation – this is the second horn of the para-paradoxical result. Up to this point Nozick agrees with the sceptic. However, he does not follow him in the "short step"³⁵ which goes from this to the conclusion that we cannot know anything. According to him, many beliefs of ours satisfy the conditions

on knowledge he laid down, many beliefs track the truth, for example the one which constitutes the first horn of the para-paradoxical result.

So, Nozick maintains, here we have the result explained away. Far from being a paradox, he thinks it is a *virtue* of his own approach. In fact, it combines the possibility of knowledge with the 'fascination' sceptical hypotheses exert on us. It explains the ambivalence of some sceptics – David Hume among them – who confess a considerable weakening of their scepticism when they stop to reflect upon philosophical questions³⁶. It fits his general conception of what philosophy is, namely not a series of efforts to gain proofs (that the sceptic is wrong, for instance), confutations, and the like, but to arrive at explanations (of how knowledge is possible given the logical possibility of being brains in a vat, for instance).

However, in spite of the smart and bright account of knowledge Nozick displays, it seems something does not work. We saw that Nozick attempts to account for two intuitions of ours: the first relative to the possibility of knowledge, the other to the fascination of scepticism. Now, as I made clear above, I think it is important to allow for our pre-philosophical intuitions, even if they are not 'revealed truths', and must be carefully handled, discussed, and criticised. From this point of view, no doubt the first intuition belongs to our natural attitude towards human knowledge, but *not* the second. At a theoretically primitive stage, each one of us would think that the acquisition of genuine knowledge falls within the effective power of human cognitive abilities, and we would be unlikely to think of sceptical scenarios, if not at a philosophically refined stage. It is the philosopher – or someone who has already undertaken definite lines of reasoning – who takes into consideration the brains-in-a-vat hypothesis – not the so-called 'man in the street'. It would be very hard to go about our everyday lives, were we to firmly believe in a sceptical scenario. To be sure, we may cast doubts on the rightness of our most cherished beliefs, but this would come from another pre-philosophical intuition of ours, viz. the intrinsic uncertainty of our knowledge – i.e. fallibilism – which does not amount to scepticism. Therefore, contrary to Nozick, I think there is no fascination of scepticism that our favourite account of knowledge should explain.

Rather, the fact that Nozick *feels* such a fascination, and hence the fact that according to his account the sceptical hypotheses remain on the carpet of metaphysical possibilities, depends on the conception of truth he adopts – a non-epistemic conception – which ends by *undermining* the very possibility of knowledge which a correct pre-philosophical intuition urged on the contrary to safeguard. Indeed, the possibility of knowledge was explained by means of the tracking relation, taken as a real factual relation to reality. Yet,

the non-epistemic conception of truth has it that the establishing of this relation in the various particular cases might be beyond the effective power our cognitive faculties possess, yielding the result that it might be impossible for us to connect with the relevant fact. Nozick delegates to science the task of finding out whether our *alleged* tracking relations actually hold or not³⁷, but on the basis of the non-epistemic conception of truth which guides such a task, nothing excludes the possibility that we never arrive at establishing all or many of our tracking relations – if not by sheer miracle. After all, it is Nozick himself who acknowledges that “we don’t track some particular truths”³⁸, for instance the ‘truth’ that we are *not* brains in a vat. But how is it possible to state in advance a distinction between trackable and untrackable truths – i.e. knowable and unknowable truths? In this respect, all the truths are on the same level: they are either trackable or untrackable³⁹. So, if we do not track the alleged truth that we are not brains in a vat, then we do not track the alleged truth that we *are* brains in a vat, either. Both possibilities are beyond our ken, given that according to non-epistemicity there is an intrinsic limit to our cognitive capacities. Both possibilities coexist, and since the second entails that we do *not know* anything – contrary to the first horn of the para-paradoxical result – we have it that our para-paradox becomes a thorough paradox. We may all be brains in a vat after all, and never know it. Hence, in the end the *simply* non-epistemic interpretation of truth collapses into one which is *radically* non-epistemic.

6. Conclusion

It seems that the tension we detected in Nozick’s system of thought cannot be resolved, and thus ends up jeopardising the system itself. The aim of stemming scepticism and saving the possibility of knowledge proved itself untenable within a simply non-epistemic conception of truth, since the latter collapses into a radical one.

Perhaps, as far as Nozick is concerned, it is not quite correct to speak of a ‘system of thought’ – taken as a set of well-defined theses and cogent arguments – because it would contrast with his philosophical method. This method is surely morally irreproachable, given that it is prompted by the refusal to ‘impose’ ideas on anybody, but I would doubt that philosophical ideas are put forward, analysed, emended, etc., without trying to convince someone – e.g., a sceptical opponent. If this is correct, it is no surprise that this method reveals controversial aspects with respect to sceptical theses –

theses to which Nozick accords undisturbed asylum in the philosophical realm, whereas it would be better to have an argument which showed how they lack 'citizenship rights'. It is as if the *mere* presence of sceptical hypotheses allowed them to take the lion's share and get the better of the other hypotheses in the realm.

We saw that Nozick's philosophical method is somehow the consequence of his ardent fallibilism. Dissatisfaction with the method could therefore bring one to revise fallibilism. However, the problem does not reside in fallibilism⁴⁰, but in some of the elements we came across along the way, in particular the non-epistemic notion of truth. It is the combination of *this* notion and fallibilism which is a non-starter.

If things stand so, what about the boat with which we began our tour around Nozick's planet? That vessel is doomed to keep forever an offing, but the sailors should have the opportunity of singling the damaged parts out, so that they can repair them. However, if we are to be deprived of this opportunity, if our feet should rest on no 'cognitive plank', not even an uncertain and temporary one, then Nozick's boat will end up sinking, and the final outcome of all this is that we shall find ourselves nothing short of shipwrecked mariners at the mercy of the waves of an odd reality.

Notes

¹ Cf. Nozick 2001: 2.

² Cf. Peirce 1905.

³ McGinn 2002.

⁴ Nozick 1981: 13.

⁵ Nozick 2001: 4.

⁶ *Ivi*: 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ivi*: 10.

⁹ *Ivi*: 11.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Cf. Nozick 1981: 680, where he says he considers “only statements that are true if and only if their negations are false”.

¹² Facts give substance to the ‘makes-true’ relation, according to Nozick (cf. Nozick 2001: 71ff). However, he is quite cautious here, and hastens to add that “Perhaps our explanations need not halt at the level of *facts*. It is not clear whether facts are an additional ontological category that we must countenance, or whether they too are reducible to some combination of the ultimate ontological components” (*ivi*: 74).

¹³ As we shall see below, genuine pieces of knowledge ‘track the facts’.

¹⁴ Cf. Nozick 2001: 73.

¹⁵ *Ivi*: 74.

¹⁶ Dummett 1959a: 175; my italics. Cf. the analogous claim in Dummett 1959b: 14, where the author adds the remark to the effect that ‘we remain realists *au fond*’.

¹⁷ Wiggins 1980: 209-10; my italics.

¹⁸ For a statement of deflationism about truth cf. Horwich 1990.

¹⁹ Among the ‘eliminativists’ rank Frank Ramsey and those who subscribe to the so-called ‘prosentential theory of truth’.

²⁰ Nozick 2001: 74.

²¹ *Ivi*: 314-15.

²² Cf. Churchland 1989, and Churchland 1986.

²³ Cf. Nozick 2001: 52.

²⁴ Kuhn 1970: 172-73.

²⁵ Rorty 1993: 59.

²⁶ Cf. Rorty 1986: 334-35.

²⁷ Cf. Gettier 1963.

²⁸ These are an example of what I would be inclined to call ‘pre-philosophical intuitions’. (For the sake of definiteness, I must add that those beliefs would not be classified as knowledge because of their deriving, in an indirect way, from false beliefs.)

²⁹ Nozick 1981: 680.

³⁰ In this respect Nozick introduces the notion of ‘the closest possible worlds’ to the actual world, and invites us to see whether in those worlds *S* still does not believe or, accordingly, believes that *p* when *p* is false or true, respectively.

³¹ *Ivi*: 178.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Ivi: 282.

³⁴ Ivi: 281; my italics.

³⁵ Ivi: 203.

³⁶ The explanation is of course that the sceptic tracks some facts too. As to Hume, cf. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, I, IV, VII; and *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, XII, II.

³⁷ Cf. Ivi: 287.

³⁸ Ivi: 209.

³⁹ Along the gradation the grouping of interpretations of truth suggested in section 2 above points to.

⁴⁰ Fallibilism is a particular positive attitude towards *knowledge*. Therefore, there must be the possibility of acquiring knowledge, for fallibilism to have sense. Fallibilism is no threat to knowledge.

Bibliography

- Churchland, Patricia, 1986, *Neurophilosophy*, The MIT Press, Cambridge (Mass.);
- Churchland, Paul, 1989, *A Neurocomputational Perspective*, The MIT Press, Cambridge (Mass.);
- Dummett, M., 1959a, "Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Mathematics", in Dummett 1978: 166-85;
- 1959b, "Truth", in Dummett 1978: 1-24;
- 1978, *Truth and Other Enigmas*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.);
- Gettier, E., 1963, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?", in *Analysis*, 23: 121-23;
- Kuhn, Th., 1970, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago University Press, Chicago;
- McGinn, C., 2002, "An Ardent Fallibilist", in *The New York Review of Books*, 49: 39-41;
- Horwich, P., 1990, *Truth*, Blackwell, Oxford;
- Nozick, R., 1981, *Philosophical Explanations*, Oxford University Press, Oxford;
- 2001, *Invariances. The Structure of the Objective World*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.);
- Peirce, Ch. S., 1905, "Issues of Pragmaticism", in *The Monist*, 15: 481-99;
- Rorty, R., 1986, "Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth", in *Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, LePore, E., ed., Basil Blackwell, Oxford: 333-68;
- 1993, "Putnam and the Relativist Menace", in Rorty 1998: 43-62;
- 1998, *Truth and Progress. Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 3, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge;
- Wiggins, D., 1980, "What Would be a Substantial Theory of Truth?", in *Philosophical Subjects. Essays Presented to P. F. Strawson*, Van Straaten, Z., ed., Clarendon Press, Oxford: 189-221.