

Gulliver, Truth and Virtue

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Abstract What is the role of a notion of truth in our form of life? What is it to possess a notion of truth? How different would we be, if we did not possess a notion of truth? Gulliver's description of three peoples encountered during his fifth travel will help me to answer. One might say that the basic anti-realist tenet is that we should explain the notion of truth by connecting it with our practice of assertion. In this sense the outcome of my commentary of the fifth part of *Gulliver's Travels* will amount to a non-reductive anti-realist conception of truth. It can be called a dialectical conception of truth because it focuses on a particular way of resolving disagreements: an epistemically virtuous practice of verbal exchange that cares for truth. The main thesis is that an implicit awareness of the epistemically virtuous practice is a necessary condition for being in full possession of the notion of truth. The commentary will also involve an argument against deflationism and a critique of some claims made by Huw Price.

Keywords Epistemic-virtues · Disagreement · Norms of assertion · Caring for truth · Deflationism

1 Preamble

In the hitherto unknown manuscript containing the fifth part of his *Travels* Lemuel Gulliver describes three peoples living on three different islands. I shall first summarize Gulliver's description of their customs, which may be of some interest to philosophers investigating the notion of

truth. I shall then attempt to draw some conclusions from these. The three peoples encountered by Gulliver speak a language that appears to be good English, but he soon realizes that there are some important differences.

2 Laconia

Gulliver's initial unreflecting comment on the first people is: "they are a laconic tribe: they know the futility of words". Gulliver does not tell us the name of the remote island where they live. I shall call it "Laconia" (though it is not in Greece). The reason for Gulliver's remark is that the inhabitants of Laconia never engage in discussions on matters of fact, such as whether apples are ripe or whether a storm is coming. They do make utterances that seem to be assertions, but Gulliver calls these "announcements". He uses the word "announcement" almost as a technical term intended to highlight the fact that the practice of this strange community differs in some significant respects from our own practice of making assertions.

If a woman of Laconia, seated at table, announces: "This apple is ripe", she usually behaves accordingly: she eats the apple, or offers it to her child. Her announcement expresses something that functions as a basis for action, as a belief does: the sentence announced is treated as a guide for choosing means to achieve ends. In general, Laconians draw conclusions from their announcements, which manifest themselves in further announcements and in actions. The woman might say: "You like apples. This apple is ripe. Hence it can be eaten. So I give it to you." Obviously, we would be strongly inclined to interpret the woman's announcement as the sincere expression of a belief that the apple is ripe. Let us define *quasi-assertion* a speech act

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normally taken to express a behavioural disposition which, on initial consideration, we would construe as a belief. Laconian announcements are quasi-assertions.

Laconian speakers do not always act in accordance with their announcements. One of the occasions on which a Laconian is criticized by other Laconians is when a speaker's actions fail to match his/her announcements: the others shake their heads and show disapproval. They may say: "you are not sincere" or "you are not serious". This reaction is easily explained. Since an announcement expresses a disposition to behave in a certain way, Laconians rely on the announcer to behave in that way and are disappointed if this does not happen: therefore they criticize the announcement. Quasi-assertions are thus subject to a norm of sincerity.

There are other occasions for criticism in Laconia. After an announcement, if circumstances allow for a comfortable verbal exchange, other Laconians have the right to ask: "Why?". They are entitled to criticize an announcer who fails to answer. An answer is a personal justification of the announcement. A personal justification consists of further announcements. For example, the woman says: "it smells delicious", as her personal justification for the announcement "this apple is ripe". But sometimes personal justifications are concatenations of several announcements, which appear to be genuine pieces of reasoning. Some announcements are treated as incompatible with other announcements made by the same person. If the woman has announced "this apple is ripe", she would be criticized for adding "this apple is unripe". In this specific sense, announcements (and justifications) are required to be compatible with the same speaker's previous announcements. If they are not, they are criticized.

Laconians also use the word "true". They do not hesitate to transform "the apple is ripe" into "it is true that the apple is ripe" or "'the apple is ripe' is true". The converse inference is drawn with equal ease. This allows them to exploit the expressive advantages offered by the equivalence schemata containing the word "true" (A if, and only if, it is true that A; A if, and only if, "A" is true). If someone announces: "a storm is coming", rather than repeating "a storm is coming", other Laconians say "that is true", to express their agreement with the previous speaker. They may also use the word "true" to make generalizations such as: "everything the king says is true".

We have described four similarities between Laconian announcements and our assertions: (1) announcements are speech acts normally taken to express a behavioural disposition which we would *prima facie* characterize as belief (quasi-assertions); (2) Laconians give personal justifications of their announcements; (3) Laconians criticize announcements as insincere or unjustified; (4) Laconians use the word "true" in their announcements as we use it in

our assertions. However, Gulliver is right in saying that the members of the first community are "a laconic tribe". The inhabitants of Laconia talk far less than we do, because they are indifferent to the fact that their own announcements and those of their fellow-speakers often disagree. To be precise, any English speaker would say that they disagree, but Laconians do not seem to care. A boy announces: "there are crabs on the beach". A girl: "there are no crabs on the beach". Each is sincere. Each may ask the other: "Why do you say this?". And each may provide justification. However, this apparent difference of opinion does not give rise to any discussion. They accept this difference pacifically as if it were utterly negligible and inconsequential. If the personal justification given by the boy does not clash with his previous announcements, the girl will accept it with a smile, although her acceptance would seem to us incompatible with her own previous announcement and its corresponding justification. Gulliver comments that, had this happened in England, the two announcements would have led to a dialogue aimed at resolving the disagreement: arguments concerning the characteristics of the beach and the behaviour of crabs would have been advanced, accepted or rejected and, if possible, real animals would have been exhibited and examined until an agreement was reached. Or perhaps not, but in any case the disagreement would have been treated as a problem to be solved, because it would have indicated that one of the two speakers was wrong. For Laconians, by contrast, there is no notion of rightness (or wrongness) with respect to which one of the two utterances "there are crabs on the beach" and "there are no crabs on the beach" can be wrong despite its being sincere and subjectively justified.

The Laconian attitude towards disagreement sheds light on the nature of Laconian personal justifications. A personal justification is merely a concatenation of speech acts performed by a speaker in order to explain her (or his) quasi-assertion under the given contextual circumstances, for example if fellow speakers ask why that quasi-assertion was made. In the same context one speaker may give a personal justification of p while another speaker gives a personal justification of $\text{not-}p$.

Price (2003, 179), has described an imaginary community very similar to Laconia, whose members: «do not take a disagreement between two speakers in this belief-expressing linguistic dimension to indicate that one or another speaker must be at fault». Indeed, Laconians treat disagreements between announcements in the same way as we treat expressions of different subjective preferences. If a boy says "I am fond of sea-food" and a girl says "I am not fond of sea-food", we do not feel that one of the two utterances must be wrong and ought to be corrected. *For us* there is an important dissimilarity between this situation and the situation in which the boy asserts "there are crabs

on the beach” and the girl “there are no crabs on the beach”: the latter situation requires correction and resolution. For *Laconians* neither situation requires correction or resolution. For *Laconians* disagreement is never a problem. It never shows that one of the two sides is wrong. Resolution of disagreement is not necessary. Thus no dialogue aimed at resolution is generated.

3 Erisia

Erisia is the second island. Like the *Laconian* tongue, the *Erisian* language resembles English. *Erisians* make utterances that many would consider to be assertions, and I shall call them “assertions”, though, as we will see, there is reason to doubt that *Erisian* assertions are in fact genuine assertions.

There is essentially only one difference between *Laconian* announcements and *Erisian* assertions, but one which has a wealth of consequences. It concerns disagreement. In this respect *Erisians* are more similar to us. Gulliver says that “to the extent that they are inclined to assert p , *Erisians* are also inclined to ascribe error to anyone who asserts *not-p*”. They disapprove of those with whom they disagree and do all they can to resolve the disagreement. For *Laconians* disagreement is negligible; for *Erisians* it is troublesome. While *Laconians* are a peaceful people, the life of *Erisians* is bristling with criticism and controversy. An *Erisian* asserting p is aware that his (or her) social status will increase or decrease according to whether he (or she) succeeds in persuading others to accept p and join the party of those who assert p . Unpersuasiveness is social failure. Retraction is shameful. Like *Laconians*, *Erisians* have the word “true” and use it in accordance with the equivalence schemata. Unlike *Laconians*, they often use “true” to strengthen their claims or as a weapon to overcome their opponents in disputes.

Erisians seek their fellows’ agreement and approval. But their way of pursuing agreement and approval is always a power struggle. Suppose that a young man, whose name is E, asserts p and that other *Erisians* do not immediately endorse p . When E realizes that others do not agree with him, he may not have the courage to try to persuade them. In this case, since *Erisians* do not tolerate disagreement, he is forced to withdraw his assertion. This is an act of submission to the authority of the community or to a single more powerful person.

Otherwise, E should try to persuade his fellows. If he is ambitious, this is what he will do. Fame, wealth and social position depend on his capacity to achieve this aim. As a consequence, rhetorical skill is much appreciated in *Erisia*. If his fellows refrain from endorsing his assertion p , E will appeal to other sentences that they already endorse. He will then try to cajole them into accepting a connection between p and the sentences they already endorse: endorsement of

the latter leads them to endorse p . If, on the other hand, someone openly denies p in public, E will challenge his opponent and a dispute will ensue. In the public dispute E will use language to try to defeat his opponent and persuade the audience.

The art of debate is very important in *Erisia*. *Erisians* are «bred up from their Youth in the Art of Proving by words multiplied for the Purpose that *White is Black*, and *Black is White*» (Swift 2005, 231). In debates the only aim is to win, by all means, at any cost. Personal attacks are the crudest tactic. If E is a good arguer, however, he will not only question the credibility and competence of his antagonist. By exploiting the ambiguities of words and quasi-logical deceptive tricks he will trap his opponent by subtly distorting his or her position to make it appear untenable. At the same time, he will try to hide or play down any evidence against his own assertion.

Often our *Erisian*, E, will have to persuade an audience. In the first place, in order to win the dispute, E must seem trustworthy to the audience. The good *Erisian* persuader attaches the utmost importance to those verbal and non-verbal techniques able to impress the speaker’s personality on an audience and create a sense of confidence. This is the primary element in public disputes. In the second place, the skilful *Erisian* is able to appeal to the audience’s emotions and desires. E will thus try to flatter them and persuade them through fear, hope, joy, sorrow, love or hate.

Unlike *Laconians*, *Erisians* do all they can to resolve disagreements. But an *Erisian* knows only one way of resolving disagreements without humiliation, which consists in trying to impose his (or her) claims on others by any means. To this aim *Erisians* support their assertions through arguments that are different from *Laconian* personal justifications. Let us call the combative and persuasive kind of verbal exchange which is the only kind of argumentative practice in *Erisia* “*agonistic-persuasive practice*” and the arguments employed “*agonistic-persuasive justifications*”. Gulliver expresses his admiration for the wit and intelligence revealed by *Erisian* tricks and able strategies in persuasive argumentation. But, at the same time, he complains that they are too aggressive and unfriendly in discussions, that they interrupt their opponents and twist their words too often. This is why Gulliver prefers the third island.

4 Dialexia

Arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, botany and zoology flourish in *Dialexia*, the third island. However, *Dialexian* English lacks the word “true”, and its speakers have no other expression conforming to the equivalence schemata. As such, they lack the expressive resources offered by the

word “true” in British English. Gulliver is surprised that the word “true” does not exist in their language «since—he writes—they seem to understand very well what it is to seek truth».

To substantiate his statement, Gulliver tells the story of the Strangers: twelve sailors from Erisia, who survived a shipwreck and were picked up by a Dialexian fishing vessel. They were welcomed to Dialexia and remained there because the stormy sea separating the two islands is so dangerous that no one dares to cross it. The Strangers spent all the rest of their life in Dialexia, but their contentious Erisian customs remained deeply ingrained. The Dialexians noticed this peculiarity. A Dialexian scholar provided the following description of the difference between Erisians and Dialexians: «On our island there are lucky moments when two persons engage in a discussion and, though they take opposite sides, each realizes that both are driven by a deeper agreement underlying their different views: the common desire to learn. Such lucky moments give us a precious example of a critical attitude aimed not at destroying an opponent, but at understanding, helping and correcting a companion in the quest for better understanding. The Erisians seem to be completely ignorant of the possibility of this reciprocal stance. They are never tolerant of different opinions. In dispute, if they are not obliged to do so by a greater force or power, or by the sheer number of opponents, they are never willing to concede that the other party might be right or might have the stronger argument. They never really listen to new arguments or investigate novelties that could change their established views. For them it is not the better argument which determines the right conclusion, but the conclusion already espoused which determines the argument to be employed» (cf. Walton 1998, 186).

Gulliver agrees with the scholar’s description. This description—Gulliver remarks—shows that, even though the scholar lacks the word “true”, he clearly sees the difference between a dialogue aiming at truth and a discussion where the goal is to win by persuading the audience and defeat the opponent by any means. The Dialexian scholar sees the difference. The Erisians do not see it. Indeed, Gulliver adds, in Dialexia, unlike Erisia, discussions over assertions are not always adversarial, they are often cooperative: the two parties cooperate in a common investigation of the subject under discussion; during the investigation, they are also willing to retract their previous assertions if the evidence is against them. This happens both when they are engaged in practical matters, like sailing or fishing, and when they practice a scientific discipline. A Dialexian astronomer thought she had discovered a new planet. She observed the strange movements of a star and reached the conclusion that her observation could be explained only by the pull of an invisible planet. This

claim was accepted and she became famous. Afterwards, however, she found an error in her measurements. She did not hide the error. At the next astronomy conference she retracted her earlier conclusion that she had discovered a new planet. The audience was surprised and disappointed. She explained that a small mistake had misled her. By the end of her talk she was shaken. But the audience applauded to show admiration of her courage and honesty (cf. Walton 1998, 71).

Gulliver and the Dialexian scholar distinguish between two ways of resolving disagreements. One way is the agonistic-persuasive practice. This is the only way of resolving disagreements practised and known in Erisia. The second way is described by Gulliver as a practice that is aimed at truth: a practice of resolving disagreements through a verbal exchange that *cares for truth*. The Dialexian scholar cannot describe it with these words because Dialexians do not have the word “truth”. Thus he provides a complicated description. What is a truth-directed way of resolving disagreements and solving problems? We can make the notion of such a practice intelligible without defining truth and without defining “truth-directed practice”. We can make the notion intelligible by *describing* the practice. It is a way of acting that exhibits certain behavioural traits. Descriptions of the practice of seeking truth date back to the origins of philosophy. Plato describes a dialogical conduct aiming at truth and contrasts it with the argumentative practices of sophists and rhetors. A contemporary description is provided by Michael Lynch (2004, 129–130). From Lynch’s book we can glean a list of ways in which we are disposed to act if we seek truth: being willing to hear both sides of the story, being open-minded and tolerant of others’ opinions, being impartial, being careful and sensitive to detail, paying attention to the evidence, being willing to question assumptions, giving and asking for reasons, being curious, being intellectually courageous—that is, not simply believing what it is convenient to believe. So, I propose the following characterization: *a truth-directed way of resolving disagreements* is a way of resolving disagreements which exhibits certain behavioural traits which are usually considered epistemic virtues. The behavioural traits listed above are some such epistemic virtues. Other epistemic virtues can be added. One of these is the willingness to take objections seriously and to retract one’s assertions if these objections stand up to honest counterarguments. Plato insists on this type of willingness (cf. Gorgias 458a, in Plato 1997, 802): if we seek truth, we must be willing to revise our assertions when an error is discovered. The epistemic virtues are multifarious and I do not claim that the above list is exhaustive. Nor do I claim that all the virtues cohabit peacefully in the practice that cares for truth. They sometimes come into conflict with one another and a special wisdom in weighing

each virtue, an ability to find the dosage of virtues appropriate to the epistemic situation is itself an important virtue belonging to this practice. Since the epistemic virtues are essential in characterising the truth-directed way of resolving disagreements, I term it *the epistemically virtuous practice*.

5 Is A Non-Reductive Epistemic Conception of Truth Possible?

In Michael Dummett's words the basic tenet of an epistemic conception of truth is that «the source of the concept [of truth] lies in our [...] linguistic practice of assertion». To clarify the notion of truth we have to establish «a connection [...] between the notion of truth and the practice of making assertions» (Dummett 1991, 165). However «it is far from being a trivial matter» how this connection should be established (Dummett 1976, 75).

Philosophers who sympathize with epistemic conceptions of truth have tried to provide a reductive analysis of the notion of truth. A reductive analysis aims to answer the question “what is truth?” by exhibiting an equivalence of the form

(R) z is true if, and only if, z has property X,

where property X is characterized in terms of epistemic concepts that are already clear and do not presuppose the notion of truth. Serious difficulties beset all attempts at a reductive analysis of truth. Reductive analysis, however, is not the only possible way of enhancing our understanding of the notion of truth. We can uncover a connection between the notion of truth and our practice which does not take the shape of a reductive equivalence like (R). A non-reductive epistemic conception of truth should set aside the question “what is truth?” and ask instead: (i) *what is the role of the notion of truth in our practice?* Truth can play a role for us only in so far as we possess this notion. Possession of the notion must make a difference in our life, which manifests itself in our social practices. Therefore question (i) leads to another three questions: (ii) *what is it to possess the notion of truth?*; (iii) *how different would we be if we did not possess the notion of truth?*; (iv) *what social practices embody our possession of the notion of truth?* The crucial question is (iv). If we highlight the (epistemic) practices in which our possession of the notion of truth is embodied, we can answer the other three questions. Therefore I will focus on question (iv). An answer is a first decisive step towards a non-reductive epistemic conception of truth. Gulliver's fifth journey can help us. We have identified five distinct linguistic practices:

- (1) speakers perform and accept quasi-assertions, and criticize them when they turn out to be insincere;
- (2) individual speakers provide personal grounds for their own quasi-assertions by connecting them with other quasi-assertions;
- (3) speakers try to resolve disagreements between quasi-assertions by imposing their own quasi-assertions on other speakers by means of agonistic-persuasive argumentation (or surrender and withdraw their quasi-assertion, if they fail);
- (4) speakers try to resolve disagreements between quasi-assertions by means of an epistemically virtuous verbal exchange;
- (5) speakers use the word “true” (or analogous words) in accordance with the equivalence schemata.

Laconians have only practices 1, 2 and 5. Erisians display practices 1, 2, 3 and 5, but are completely devoid of 4. Dialexians, on the other hand, have practices 1, 2, 3 and 4, but lack 5. We can ask whether these three peoples possess the notion of truth. The question provides an interesting benchmark for testing ideas on truth.

6 Deflationism and the Normativity of Truth

The first idea we shall consider is the basic idea of the deflationary conception of truth. Paul Horwich writes: «the concept of truth is entirely captured by our accepting instances of the disquotational schema, “ p ” is true if and only if p ’, where ‘ p ’ can be replaced by (almost) any declarative sentence in our language» (Horwich 1996, 878, cf. 2005). On this view our possession of the notion of truth consists wholly in our mastery of the use of the word “true”, and the use of “true” is completely governed by rules that make it possible to transform statements of the form “it is true that p ” (or “ p is true”) into p , and viceversa.

The second idea is expressed by Crispin Wright in the motto that truth «is a norm of assertoric practice» (cf. Wright 1992, 15–17). An act of assertion can be criticized in many ways. These different kinds of criticism correspond to different notions of correctness and incorrectness, which differ in their degree of objectivity: the correctness of an assertion can be more or less independent of the speaker. Sincerity is a first notion of correctness for assertions, which is closely linked to the speaker. Justifiedness is a second notion of correctness, which can be more or less objective. But «there is a third kind of norm for assertion which—unlike the two norms [of sincerity and justifiedness]—is linked to the notion of truth in an intrinsic way» (Price 1998, 246). Truth is the most objective notion of correctness for assertions (cf. Dummett 1976,

83–87). A sentence asserted ought to be true in the context of utterance. If it is not true, the corresponding assertion is objectively incorrect, even if the speaker is sincere and provides a justification.

From Gulliver's fifth journey we can learn something about different kinds of justification and their relation to truth. Laconian speakers offer personal justifications for their announcements. Erisian speakers advance agonistic-persuasive justifications for their claims. Dialexian speakers also avail themselves of justifications of a third kind: *epistemically virtuous justifications*. Epistemically virtuous justifications are relative to an epistemic situation, i.e. to a set of open problems and already accepted arguments shared by a group of speakers in a truth-seeking verbal exchange at a given time. If an assertion is challenged, the epistemically virtuous speaker is committed to providing an argument that the other truth-seeking participants in the epistemic situation can acknowledge as an argument supporting the asserted sentence. This means that the argument stands up to all the objections raised by the truth-directed speakers taking part in the epistemic situation. Such an argument is an epistemically virtuous justification of the assertion. Virtuous justifiedness is more independent of speakers than personal or agonistic-persuasive justifiedness. However it cannot be equated with truth, because the fact that an argument has hitherto stood up to all criticism does not entitle one to conclude that the truth-seeking practice may not lead to a new and successful criticism, convincing the truth-directed participants in the next epistemic situation to withdraw the argument and the corresponding assertion. The force that drives the investigators from the previous epistemic situation to the next one is their seeking truth. This force is always active simply because seeking truth involves complying with an implicit acknowledgment that what is virtuously justified at time t may nevertheless be untrue and that there are undiscovered truths for which no justification is presently available. Moreover, nothing of what we have said so far about the epistemically virtuous practice justifies the claim that for all statements p , if p is true, then there exists a virtuous argument supporting p . Truth is a more objective norm than epistemically virtuous justifiedness.

Wright (1992, 12–24) contends that the deflationary idea and the normative idea are incompatible. Horwich (1996, 879) effectively argues that «our use of the truth predicate to formulate» the «normatively significant fact [...] that one has reason to say what one believes to be true» can be «fully explained by the disquotation schema». Thus Horwich maintains that the two ideas are compatible. Laconia, however, seems to show that Wright's conclusion is correct: the two ideas are not compatible.

7 Do Laonians Possess a Notion of Truth?

Laonians follow rules for the use of the word “true” that allow to transform statements of the form «it is true that p » (or «“ p ” is true») into p , and viceversa. The deflationist holds that possession of the notion of truth is nothing more than a grasp of these rules. So, the deflationist must conclude that the people of Laconia possess the notion of truth.

Such a conclusion is unacceptable to advocates of the normative view, who insist that an assertion can be incorrect even if it is sincere and justified. The notion of correctness they appeal to is a notion which is independent of the individual speaker: this non-subjective correctness, they say, is truth. Laonians lack such a notion: they do not apply any notion of *intersubjective* correctness to announcements. The boy says “there are crabs on the beach” and the girl says “there are no crabs on the beach”; both are sincere and provide personal justifications. For Laonians there is no further notion of correctness with respect to which one of the two utterances is incorrect and one is correct for *both* speakers. Since Laonians do not apply any notion of intersubjective correctness to announcements, an advocate of the normative view must conclude that Laonians lack the notion of truth. The deflationist, as we have seen, holds that Laonians have full possession of the notion of truth. Therefore the deflationary idea and the normative idea are incompatible. The deflationist focuses exclusively on the use of the word “true” and neglects the role of truth as an intersubjective norm of assertion. If one espouses the normative idea, one must reject deflationism. The above is a reformulation of Price's objection to deflationism as I understand it. But Price's *pars construens*, his proposed view of the role of truth, fails to account for the difference between Erisia and Dialexia.

8 Do Erisians Possess a Notion of Truth?

Price (1998 and 2003) would say that Erisian assertions are genuine, because «what matters [for genuine assertion] is that disagreement itself be treated as grounds for disapproval» (2003, 179). Erisians do disapprove of those with whom they disagree and do all they can to resolve the disagreement. If they feel strong enough, they open a debate and try to win it by any means. According to Price (2003, 186) «playing the game to win» and «intolerance of disagreement» are «what matters» for assertoric practice.

On Price's view, if agonistic-persuasive practice is present in a linguistic community, then truth is a norm of assertion for that community. If Price is right, Erisians are in full possession of the notion of truth. Is this plausible? They certainly have the word “true”. Do they really have *our notion* of truth? Do they (implicitly) take themselves to

be governed by this notion as a norm of their assertoric discourse? The problem here is that nothing in their behaviour indicates any concern for truth. If a norm of truth exists, it should be something along the lines of: in making assertions you ought to seek truth (cf. Rorty 1995, 287). But Erisians don't care about truth at all! The behaviour of an Erisian arguer corresponds to Plato's portrait of the sophists who practice skilled dispute for the sake of victory (Sophist 268, in Plato 1997, 292) and of rhetors whose speeches only «instil persuasion in the souls of an audience» (Gorgias 453a, in Plato 1997, 798). Victory and persuasion can be attained without truth (sometimes more easily). Hence sophists and rhetors «do not care at all about truth» (Phaedrus 272d, in Plato 1997, 549). Their aim is not truth, but power. Price's version of the normative view is, at least in part, wrong.

Erisians lack the notion of truth as a norm of assertion because they have no idea of what it is to care about whether an assertoric act complies with the norm of truth. In other words Erisians have no idea of what it is to seek truth. Why? Because they completely ignore the epistemically virtuous practice of truth-seeking verbal exchange. Erisians know only the agonistic-persuasive practice. The goal of the agonistic-persuasive practice is not truth, but victory. Price rightly notes that there is a connection between a community's possession of our notion of truth and the presence of a practice aimed at resolving disagreements. But not all practices aimed at resolving disagreements can be constitutive of the notion of truth. Price fails to distinguish between different ways of resolving disagreements. The particular way of resolving disagreements that is constitutive of our possession of the notion of truth is the epistemically virtuous practice.

9 Do Dialexians Possess a Notion of Truth?

The moral of our story is that members of a linguistic community treat their quasi-assertions as acts which are governed by a norm of truth only if they

- (i) treat disagreements between such acts as problems that ought to be resolved and
- (ii) manifest their awareness that the way in which disagreements and doubts *ought* to be resolved is the epistemically virtuous practice.

The Dialexian scholar's speech shows that Dialexians have the epistemically virtuous practice and that they are also to some extent aware of the difference between the latter and the agonistic-persuasive practice. Moreover the admiration for the astronomer's honesty and the reprobation for the Erisian combative attitude manifest an implicit conviction that disagreements ought to be resolved by means of the

epistemically virtuous practice and not in the agonistic-persuasive way. We may conclude: Dialexians make genuine assertions, which are subject to the norm of truth.

Advocates of the normative view might in addition conclude that Dialexians have a grasp of the notion of truth. Dialexians, however, do not have the word "true" or analogous words whose use is governed by the equivalence-schemata. A deflationist should therefore say that Dialexians completely lack the notion of truth. The deflationist may say that the virtuous way of resolving disagreements highlighted above, though virtuous and noble, does not form part of our grasping the concept of truth and is not constitutive of the *specific* role of this concept. «Since we have a word "true" used in accordance with the equivalence rules, which allow for certain generalizations—the deflationist will argue—we can say that people who are disposed to argue in virtuous ways aim at making true statements. But the virtuous practice is neither necessary nor sufficient for possession of the concept of truth».

I sympathise with the normative conception of truth and believe that the specific practice which manifests the fact that speakers take themselves to be governed by a norm of truth for assertions is the epistemically virtuous practice. But this does not necessarily mean we should credit Dialexians with a full grasp of the notion of truth.

10 The Dialectical Version of the Normative View

The notion of truth does not do its job simply through an intolerance of disagreement. This conclusion has led us to a different version of the idea that truth is a norm for assertion. Loosely inspired by Plato's polemic against rhetors and sophists, I call this "the dialectical view".

According to the dialectical view, an individual speaker *X asserts a sentence p* if, and only if,

- (1) *X* makes a quasi-assertion by uttering *p* and
- (2) *X* implicitly accepts the rule that if another speaker disagrees, then such disagreement ought to be resolved through the epistemically virtuous practice.

On the dialectical view, communities such as the Laconians or Erisians, which completely ignore the epistemically virtuous practice of truth-seeking verbal exchange, do not make genuine assertions and lack a full grasp of the notion of truth, even if they have a word like "true". Since they lack the notion of truth, they also lack the notion of objective fact. Therefore they are very different from us. On this view, individual speakers who grasp the notion of truth may very often fail to comply with the epistemic virtues. But an implicit awareness (based on some experience of it) that the epistemically virtuous practice is an available way of resolving disagreements is a *necessary*

condition for being in full possession of the notion of truth. The advocate of the dialectical view, however, is not committed to saying that this condition is also sufficient.

There are good grounds for thinking that full possession of the notion of truth also requires the availability of a word like “true” which is used according to the equivalence schemata. Only by means of such a word can we unite the multifarious behavioural traits that contribute to the epistemically virtuous practice of truth-seeking verbal exchange. So we can make a clear distinction between this practice and other forms of behaviour. The word “true” is used to summarize the general aim of the epistemically virtuous practice: it is the practice that aims at establishing true statements. The mere indeterminate awareness of the existence of the epistemically virtuous practice alone is not sufficient for a full possession of the *notion* of this practice. The word “true” is needed in order to be fully conscious of the practice of truth-seeking.

The supporter of the dialectical view, therefore, claims that *there are two social practices that, taken together, embody a community's full possession of the notion of truth*: 1) the epistemically virtuous practice and 2) use of the word “true” (or analogous words) in accordance with the equivalence schemata. Laconia, Erisia and Dialexia show that the two practices are independent. Do Dialexians possess a notion of truth? Not completely, because they do not have a word to express the aim of the virtuous practice in general. *We* possess the notion of truth fully, because we have both the virtuous practice and the word “true”.

11 Reply to An Objection

I have criticized deflationism and Price's version of the normative conception of truth on the basis of two counterexamples. The counterexamples were given by offering descriptions of the social behaviour of two communities, Laconia and Erisia. If deflationism were right, Laconians would possess a notion of truth, but they do not. If Price were right, Erisians would possess a notion of truth, but they do not. It might be objected that our descriptions of Laconia and Erisia contain violations of logical or physical laws, so that in reality the counterexamples are not possible. We have assumed, but not demonstrated that communities like Laconia and Erisia are possible.

My reply is that the possibility of communities like Laconia and Erisia is simply there, before our eyes. Perhaps Gulliver miscalculated his ship's course and unknowingly discovered fragments of our daily life under the impression that they were strange peoples on remote islands. Fragments of our ordinary linguistic practice are manifestly characterized by the behavioural relations between speakers portrayed by Gulliver when he describes Laconia and Erisia. Some

family conversations around the dinner table are very similar to Laconia. And many political assemblies resemble Erisia. Whole communities behaving like Laconia or Erisia would survive only briefly or with great difficulty, but it seems to me hard to deny that they are physically and logically possible. Laconia or Erisia would be real, if those fragments of our behaviour which resemble them were not mere fragments of a richer interconnection of practices, but independent wholes. Such independent wholes would be socially unstable. They would be profoundly different from our linguistic community, where we make genuine assertions under the norm of truth. A Laconian (or Erisian) utterance would not have the meaning of an utterance of the same sentence in British English. The two utterances would not have meanings of the same kind, even if they were embedded in two behaviourally indistinguishable fragments of linguistic practice. Nevertheless, if the descriptions of the collective behavioural wholes of Laconia and Erisia contained a violation of logical or physical laws, the descriptions of the corresponding fragments of our own practice would also contain such a violation. A faithful description of fragments of our own behaviour cannot violate logical or physical laws. Our behaviour and its fragments are possible, because they are real. Therefore Laconia and Erisia are also possible.

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