[Estudios]

Truth is what the context makes of it

La verdad es lo que el contexto hace de ella

Keith Allan
Monash University (Australia)

Recibido: 03.10.2021 Aceptado: 25.11.2021

ABSTRACT

This essay shows that truth cannot be divorced from human experience and an individual's world view, his or her weltanschauung. There exist different weltanschauungen that favour alternative truths. Thus, loosely speaking, truth is determined by context. It may be socially acceptable to prefer one among the alternative truths as truly true, but this goal necessarily involves taking an ideological perspective on what is perceived and accepted as the sole truth. In other words, it is prejudiced. The truth value assigned to the proposition *God exists* starkly illustrates this claim, but in the course of this essay I demonstrate that alternative truths are widespread and that conflicting truths can co-exist within a community even when they create dissension. A hegemonic group will assert a preference for one truth over its alternatives, but that does not eliminate the existence of alternative truths. Alternative weltanschauungen need to be managed somehow, and the recognition that alternative truths exist is one step in their management.

KEYWORDS

FUZZY TRUTH, ALTERNATIVE TRUTHS, INCONTROVERTIBLE TRUTHS, IDEOLOGIES, WELTANSCHAUUNGEN, CONTEXT.

RESUMEN

Este ensayo muestra que la verdad no puede separarse de la experiencia humana y la visión del mundo de un individuo, su weltanschauung. Existen diferentes weltanschauungen que favorecen verdades alternativas. Por lo tanto, hablando libremente, la verdad está determinada por el contexto. Puede ser socialmente

aceptable preferir una de las verdades alternativas como verdaderamente verdadera, pero este objetivo implica necesariamente adoptar una perspectiva ideológica sobre lo que se percibe y acepta como la única verdad. En otras palabras, depende de prejuicios. El valor de verdad asignado a la proposición *God exists* ilustra claramente esta afirmación, pero en el curso de este ensayo demuestro que las verdades alternativas están muy extendidas y que las verdades en conflicto pueden coexistir dentro de una comunidad incluso cuando crean disensión. Un grupo hegemónico afirmará una preferencia por una verdad sobre sus alternativas, pero eso no elimina la existencia de verdades alternativas. Los weltanschauungen alternativas deben gestionarse de alguna manera, y el reconocimiento de que existen verdades alternativas es un paso en su gestión.

PALABRAS CLAVE
VERDAD VAGA, VERDADES ALTERNATIVAS, VERDADES INDISCUTIBLES, IDEOLOGÍAS, WELTANSCHAUUNGEN, CONTEXTO.

Balthazar sighed and said
'Truth naked and unashamed. That's a splendid phrase. But we always see her as she seems, never as she is. Each man has his own interpretation.'
(Lawrence Durrell, *Mountolive*, Durrell, 2012: 581)

I. Why truth matters

I am a linguist, not a philosopher, so please forgive my naivety with respect to philosophy. I got interested in hypotheses about truth when seeking to account for linguistic meaning from the perspectives of linguistic semantics and pragmatics. Donald Davidson seems roughly correct in saying (1):

(1) [T]o give truth conditions is a way of giving the meaning of a sentence. (Davidson 1967: 310)

Take (2):

(2) It's raining.

To understand the meaning of (2) is to understand that *It's raining* is true if, and only if, it is in fact raining. This interpretive process apparently functions under Tarski's truth definition (Tarski 1956), which can be rendered as (3).

(3) φ is true iff φ.

A similar enough notion is found in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*:

> To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true. (Aristotle 1984: 1011b25-27)

In other words, a proposition is true if it corresponds to the facts, to the way things actually are (Moore 1902); otherwise it is false. A proposition equates to a representation (statement) of a purported belief, such that the belief is true if it corresponds to the facts. Looking back to (3), (3) is an abstraction which asserts that the correspondence is between a proposition *φ* in the object language and a metalanguage statement φ of the way things are, which assigns proposition *φ*'s meaning.

II. The importance of context in determining truth

More often than not, fully appropriate understanding of an utterance or set of utterances requires some knowledge of context. Consider (4), adapted from Giora 2003: 175.

> (4) Emma come first. Den I come. Den two asses come together. I come once-a-more. Two asses, they come together again. I come again and pee twice. Then I come one lasta time.

The context is a joke that can be found at various URLs, see (5) – for which I apologize to all Italians.

> (5) A bus stops and two Italian men get on. They sit down and engage in an animated conversation. The lady sitting behind them ignores them at first, but her attention is galvanized when she hears one of the men say the following:
>
> 'Emma come first. Den I come. Den two asses come together. I come once-a-more. Two asses, they come together again. I come again and pee twice. Then I come one lasta time.'
>
> 'You foul-mouthed sex obsessed swine,' spluttered the lady indignantly. 'In this country we don't speak aloud in public places about our sex lives.'
>
> 'Hey, coola down lady,' retorted the man. 'Who talkin' abouta sexa? I'ma justa tellin' my frienda how to spella *Mississippi*.'

Much more prosaically, the various meanings of English lexemes *bank* and *cup* (inter multos alios) are, necessarily, elicited with reference to different contexts (Allan 2001; 2020a). The truth of (2), *It's raining*, is dependent on context, more exactly, C1 (in terms of Allan 2018) – the time and place spok en of in (2). Another way of putting this is that

truth, the extension for a proposition, is tied to a world at a certain time: extensionality is existence or nonexistence at a world w paired with a time t, <w,t>. Suppose you were asked to discover the name of the first child born in the year 2000. You search the records and report *The first child born in 2000 was Zaphod Beeblebrox*. Whether or not this is true depends on where you looked: the international date line runs longitudinally through the western Pacific, so a child born at 2 a.m. on January 1, 2000 in, say, Fiji, was born 23 hours before a child born at 2 a.m. on January 1, 2000 in Samoa (about 1000 kms east). Or take (6):

(6) Marilyn Monroe would have been 100 on June 1, 2026.

(6) is true because, although Marilyn Monroe died in 1962, we can imagine a possible world of June 1, 2026 at which she was still alive and, given that Norma Jeane Mortenson was born on June 1, 1926, Marilyn Monroe would indeed have been 100 in 2026. Actually, there is a good case for claiming that, strictly speaking, (7) is only fuzzily true.

(7) Marilyn Monroe was born June 1, 1926.

'Marilyn Monroe' was not born in 1926 because the name on the referent's birth certificate is 'Norma Jeane Mortenson'; she did not adopt the name *Marilyn Monroe* until August 1946 (and before that she occasionally used the pseudonym *Jean Norman*). We need to admit that (7) expresses a fuzzy truth. Or, preferably, one should say there is often a fuzzy set (Zadeh 1965; 1971; 1972) of truths such that some so-called truths are less true than others. Truer than (7) is (8).

(8) The woman who became Marilyn Monroe was born Norma Jeane Mortenson on June 1, 1926.

(7) and (8) raise interesting questions about how we recognize what I describe as the same referent, a matter discussed by John Locke in Book 2, Chapter 27 of the second edition of *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding* (Locke 1694). The following groups of names each have the same referent though the form of the name may change and the physical and other characteristics of the referent may also change over time: *London* has the same referent as *Londres*, *შევარდნაძე* as *Shevardnadze*, *Byzantion* as *Kōnstantinoupolis* as *Kostantiniyye* as *İstanbul*. A slightly worse problem

than (7) and (8) is presented by parallel statements about a transgender person in (9) and (10).

(9) Catherine Elizabeth McGregor was born on 24 May 1956.

(10) Catherine Elizabeth McGregor was born Malcolm Gerard McGregor on 24 May 1956. She transitioned in 2012.

There is a different problem with (11) than with (7) or (9). At best (11) is a misleading fuzzy truth because (12) is more truly true.

(11) Robert Zimmerman wrote 'Blowin' in the Wind'.

(12) Bob Dylan wrote 'Blowin' in the Wind'.

(11) can be rectified to something like (13) to become truly true (though it is still a bit weird).

(13) Robert Zimmerman wrote 'Blowin' in the Wind' under his stage name *Bob Dylan.*

III. More on the fuzziness of truth

In many perfectly acceptable statements, the truth is fuzzy. For example, (14)–(17).

(14) La France est un hexagone / France is hexagonal.
(15) I'll see you at six.
(16) It's 1800 kms from Melbourne to the Sunshine Coast.
(17) The President is arriving at Kennedy Airport as I speak.

With respect to (14), Metropolitan France is only roughly hexagonal. The promise of (15) would typically be fulfilled if the meeting took place ten minutes either side of six (and perhaps with an even wider margin of error). The '1800 kms' distance between Melbourne and the Sunshine Coast is a very rough estimate and the true distance depends on such factors as exactly which starting and end points are chosen within the two locations and the particular route and means of travel selected. In (17) the progressive indicates that arrival is ongoing and, in reality, the time of arrival is a fuzzy set: there is rarely a single instant of arrival, though there may be several time instants that can be claimed as possible contenders. Notably, the verb *arrive* is NOT used in a timed race to label the punctual events of breaking the tape, touching the end of the pool, etc.

Category boundaries are often fuzzy: categories like rugs and carpets, or cups and mugs, or shrubs, bushes, and small trees seem to merge gradually one into another rather than starkly abut one another; so that, although the prototypical exemplars of each category are clearly different, the boundary between, say, a small carpet and a large rug is fuzzy. And in (18), how far along its body does the snake's tail begin?

(18) Mowgli picked up the snake by the tail.

In real life, fuzzy truths (there is another example in the final sentence of (27)) are generally easy to cope with: people are usually satisfied that they count as true enough for most contexts.

Aristotle favoured bivalent truth (1011b25-27, quoted above), but many find this inadequate for propositions such as (19).

(19) In 2021 the King of France went bald.

While the nonsense in (19) is not true, it is not obviously false like the contradictory (20).

(20) My brother is an only child.

Strawson 1950 suggested that statements like (19) with false presuppositions (in 2021 there is no King of France) have no truth value. Quine 1960 dubbed this a 'truth-value gap' which gives rise to trivalent truth: true, false, and indeterminable. True and false are no longer contradictories, but contraries. Indeterminable sentences are best dealt with as a pragmatic problem and I will say no more about them here.

IV. Incontrovertible truths and contingent truths

Although it is often claimed that truth is something independent of human action and belief, the set of such incontrovertible truths – true at all worlds and times – is quite limited. If we restrict ourselves to numerals then (21) is incontrovertibly true (though see my qualification in Section 8) and so are propositions like (22).

(21) 1+1=2; 1+1+1=3; …
(22) A cat is an animal.

By contrast, the truth of (2), *It's raining*, is contingent on only certain worlds and times (those at which it is raining at the time of utterance).

From a cognitivist or functionalist viewpoint, language, and particularly meaning in language, is closely bound to human action and belief. Consequently, convictions about what constitutes truth are likewise closely bound to human action and belief (cf. Shapin 1994). There are many kinds of speech act for which the evaluation of truth is either inapplicable or of secondary consideration to aspects of speaker credibility and sincerity, for example, when giving advice, apologizing, thanking, commiserating with or congratulating someone. In human communication it is not sufficient to utter a truth, the truth also needs to be credible and in some social interactions it is important to transmute the truth in order to preserve social harmony. Thus, we emphasize cooperation in social interaction by maintaining what Grice 1975 called 'the maxim of quality' enjoining a speaker to ensure his or her credibility by being genuine and sincere. (Yes, this is a modification of what Grice actually wrote in order to extend his conjecture to speech acts other than assertions, e.g. (15) as a promise, see Allan 2001 for justification.)

V. The function of weltanschauungen in determining truth

Truth is determined for an individual by his or her understanding of the context, their beliefs about the way things are. Take my claim above that it is incontrovertibly true that 1+1=2, 1+1+1=3. Suppose a sitting room contains one male person and a woman walks in. Now there two people in the room. Or are there? If the woman is in the first trimester of pregnancy there is a case for claiming that there are at least three people in the room (if she is pregnant with twins, there would be four). Is the unborn foetus a person? An antiabortionist would say yes, and if the woman were murdered the murderer could be charged with two deaths in certain jurisdictions, e.g.

> 'The Unborn Victims of Violence Act of 2004 (Public Law 108-212) is a United States law which recognizes an embryo or fetus in utero as a legal victim, if they are injured or killed during the commission of any of over 60 listed federal crimes of violence'. (See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unborn_Victims_of_Violence_Act)

Now let's revert to the matter of the fuzziness of truth.

> (23) There is a man in the sitting room and a woman walks in, so there are now two people in the sitting room, a man and a woman.

If that is sum total of one's knowledge, then the proposition in (23), *there are now two people in the sitting room*, does seem to be true. And if the woman were unaware she was in fact pregnant there would be no reason for any observer to doubt the truth of (23). But suppose she did know she was pregnant, but it was not showing. It is surely not true that when the woman walked in *two people walked into the sitting room*, though there would be an argument for claiming as true: *two people entered the sitting room – one inside the other*. My point is that truth is based on one's interpretation (understanding) of the context being spoken of. In terms of Allan 2018; 2023, (23) allows for different situations of interpretation, C3. In brief, the context of a language expression ε – a constituent of utterance υ by S (speaker, writer, signer) such that ε⊆υ – comprises what might be called three categories of context: C1, C2, and C3. C1 is 'the world (and time) spoken of' by S, a mental model of an actual or recalled or imagined world. C1 captures what is said about what at some world – a possible world accessible from C2. C1, a model of the world (and time) spoken of is the content of a mental space which can be readily associated in a variety of ways with other worlds (and times) occupying other mental spaces. C1 is largely identified from co-text. C2, 'the world spoken in', is the situation from S's point of view in which υ is expressed. C2 captures who does the saying to whom, and where and when this takes place. C2 normally determines the social relationships and conventions that S is expected to follow and, in consequence, sets the standard for the psycho-social appropriateness of what is said. C3 is a corresponding situation of interpretation in which H (audience, reader) seeks to understand ε⊆υ, i.e. the meaning of ε in the context (C1 + C2) of the utterance υ in which it occurs; this is the interpretation from H's point of view. In face-to-face interaction, C3 is approximately identical with C2 but perceived from a different point of view. So far as possible, S predicts common ground with H in order to shape utterance υ for maximum comprehensibility. Where C3 is very different from C2 such that H does not share many of S's system of beliefs and assumptions, the context is disparate from S's presumed common ground. Although H may well be confident s/he understands what S intended to mean, ε⊆υ can have reduced comprehensibility and its psycho-social appropriateness may be differently evaluated from the way S expected to be understood, as when as when a 21st century H reads a text

by William Shakespeare (S). What I have been calling 'point of view' would be more accurately be called *weltanschauung* (plural *weltanschauungen*).[1] Reverting to (23) in which the woman spoken of is pregnant, there is a case for claiming that there are alternative truths: one truth takes the presence of two adult humans as true; the other truth adds the presence of the unobservable foetus as a third person. In this essay I am claiming that it is not the case that only one of these judgments is truly true: both are viable truths under different points of view, different weltanschauungen. Thus, the truth of (23) is fuzzy.

VI. Alternative facts

'Alternative facts', rather than *alternative truths*, was a phrase used by U.S. Counsellor to the President Kellyanne Conway during a 'Meet the Press' interview on January 22, 2017, in which she defended White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer's false statement about the attendance numbers at Donald J. Trump's inauguration as 45th President of the United States. Although in common parlance, *alternative fact* has come to mean "falsehood", I want to adopt the term *alternative truths* without this negative connotation to bear the meaning "viable truths under different points of view (weltanschauungen)". Interestingly, Conway, perhaps duplicitously, said in a *New York Magazine* interview:

> 'Two plus two is four. Three plus one is four. Partly cloudy, partly sunny. Glass half full, glass half empty. Those are alternative facts.' (See https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2017/03/kellyanne-conway-trumps-first-lady.html)

She thus asserts that from her and the Trump administration's point of view, so-called 'alternative facts' are true (from their point of view).

Consider another situation: is the proposition (24) true?

(24) God exists.

Let's limit discussion to the God of one of the Abrahamic religions. A believer will claim (24) is true and, indeed, most believers would regard the very questioning of its truth to be blasphemous and a few would want to inflict capital punishment on those who disagree with them. Atheists would claim (24) is false and (25) to be true.

1 When borrowed into English this noun is allowed an initial miniscule.

(25) There is no God.

The only way to cope with conflicting ideologies, conflicting weltanschauungen, is to admit that truth is dependent on point of view: God exists for the believer (say, the Archbishop of Canterbury or Imam Khomeini), but not for the atheist (say, Richard Dawkins FRS FRSL). So, once again we see alternative, and in this case mutually contradictory, truths: (24) and (25).

Roughly 50 million US citizens believe Donald J. Trump won the 2020 election and therefore presumably believe to be true Trump's claim in (26), made January 6, 2021 on the Ellipse outside the White House:

(26) 'We won. We won in a landslide.'

The alternative truth is (27):

(27) All 50 states and the District of Columbia certified their election results, which Congress sought to finalize on January 6, 2021. Those results show that Biden won with 306 electoral votes, to Trump's 232. Biden also won the popular vote by about 7 million votes.

Trump and his supporters justify their belief in the truth of (26) by claiming widespread fraud. For instance, attorney Sidney K. Powell, who joined Trump's legal team in 2020, attempted to overturn President Joe Biden's victory by spreading election fraud theories and unsuccessfully filing lawsuits in various courts. Powell alleged that a secret international cabal of communists, 'globalists', George Soros, Hugo Chávez, the Clinton Foundation, the CIA, and thousands of Democratic officials used voting machines to transfer millions of votes away from Trump in the 2020 presidential election. She claimed that Dominion voting machines ran on technology that could switch votes away from Trump, technology she alleged to have been invented in Venezuela to help steal elections for the late Hugo Chávez. Trump himself in a 12 November 2020 tweet agreed: 'REPORT: DOMINION DELETED 2.7 MILLION TRUMP VOTES NATIONWIDE.' Citing lost business and reputational damage, Dominion filed a $1.3bn defamation lawsuit against Powell. In March 2021 Powell's defence lawyers argued that 'no reasonable person would conclude that the statements [by Powell about the 2020 election] were truly statements of fact … It was clear to reasonable persons that Powell's claims were her opinions and legal theories. … [Powell did not act with]

actual malice … [because] she believed the allegations then and she believes them now.' This was confirmed in Memorial Day speech Powell made on May 31, 2021.

I have laboured the justification for claiming that Trumpers hold to the truth of (26) because I hope, indeed expect, that all readers of this essay will prefer the truth of (27). Although I believe that Trumpers are mistaken in preferring (26) to (27), nonetheless, for them, (26) holds true. The only way to cope with these contradictory states of affairs is to allow that adherents of conflicting ideologies interpret the world in terms of alternative truths according to their conflicting points of view (weltanschauungen).

The celebrated book *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* (Gray 1992) presents the argument that in heterosexual relationships, typically, a man has a different weltanschauung from his female partner which can lead to differing interpretations of the 'same' event. There are many examples but I cite just one headed 'the primary love needs of women and men':

(28)

WOMEN NEED TO RECEIVE	MEN NEED TO RECEIVE
1. Caring	1. Trust
2. Understanding	2. Acceptance
3. Respect	3. Appreciation
4. Devotion	4. Admiration
5. Validation	5. Approval
6. Reassurance	6. Encouragement

I make no comment on the accuracy of Gray's recommendations but cite them here simply as a demonstration of widely held beliefs in the existence of alternative truths about what constitutes the validation of love within a heterosexual relationship. If Gray and his many commentators are credible, these alternative weltanschauungen of men and women have significant practical consequences for human behaviours.

VII. Evaluations

The context determined approach to truth that I am arguing for here has long been accepted for the truth of evaluative judgments like *good, beautiful, old*. The old saw *Beauty lies in the eye of the beholder* was rendered more explicitly by David Hume:

> Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty. One person may even perceive deformity, where another is sensible of beauty; and every individual ought to acquiesce in his own sentiment, without pretending to regulate those of others. (Hume 1760: 368)

Old works somewhat differently. The different interpretations of 'old' in (29) and (30) arise from the effect of C2 (essentially, the situation of utterance) on C1, what is spoken of: α_i in (29) vs α_j in (30).

(29) Queen Elizabeth II is old [uttered in 2021].
(30) Little Moreton Hall is old [uttered in 2021].

Both utterances of (29)–(30) are true as uttered in 2021, which is part of C2: Her Majesty (α_i) was born in 1926, so in 2021 she was 95 years old, which counts as old for a human; Little Moreton Hall (α_j, See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little_Moreton_Hall) was built very early in the 16th century, so it is approximately 500 years old, which counts as old for a building. Our knowledge of the differing life-spans of things is called upon when evaluating the particular meaning of *old* and the truth of such utterances (this parallels the different interpretations of *cut* given in Searle 1980). The time of utterance is relevant: in 1520 (29) would have been nonsense and (30) false ('truth-or-falsity [is characteristic] of *a use* of a sentence' (Strawson 1950: 326)).

The truths of (31) and (32) rely on very different interpretations of the conjunction *and*.

(31) Joe and his wife have a couple of kids.
(32) Joe and his sister have a couple of kids.

In (31) the presumption is that Joe and his wife co-parent two children. (32) is pragmatically somewhat infelicitous, because it is unlikely that Joe and his sister co-parent two children but rather each parent two children in separate households. Thus (32) violates the Gricean maxim of quantity (or whatever functions similarly) and should ideally be rephrased something like *Joe and his sister each have a couple of kids.* (In the unlikely event of them being incestuous co-parents this should also be made explicit.)

David Lewis's counterpart theory (Lewis 1986, but dating from Lewis 1968) enables one to capture the truth of (33) in terms of the relations between the real world and a hypothetical world.

(33) If Max owned a Tesla Model S, he thinks he'd be a lucky man.

In the real world Max does not own a Tesla, but his counterpart in the hypothetical world does. This is represented diagrammatically in Figure 1. There are alternative truths for the real world and the hypothetical world of Max's desire, and (according to (33)) in only the latter does he believe he'd be a lucky man to own a Tesla Model S.

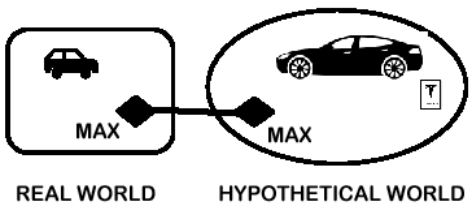

Figure 1.

VIII. All truths are contingent

I said earlier that propositions like (21) and (22) are true at all possible worlds and times, whereas the truth of most propositions is contingent on a particular (perhaps one-member) set of worlds and times.

(21) 1+1=2; 1+ 1+1=3; …
(22) A cat is an animal.

I argued that when the context specifies numerals it is invariably true that 1+1=2 whereas when counting persons this apparent truth can be open to question. Indeed, as a reviewer pointed out, this is only true for a decimal number system: in a binary system 1+1=10 and 1+1+1=11. So, we must conclude that the incontrovertible truth of (21) is in fact contingent on the context C1 being limited to numerals in a decimal number system: once again, truth is seen to be contingent on context[2]. Does this constraint also apply to the analytic proposition in (22) which is true by virtue of

2 I should clarify that the argument is relevant even though decimal 2 and binary 10 are different symbolic representations of a common concept I will name TWO. There are many alternative representations, e.g., *two, zwei, dos,* II (Latin, *duo*), 二 (Chinese, *èr*), ٢ (Arabic, *aithnayn*).

the meaning of the predicate BEING AN ANIMAL being included within the meaning of its argument BEING A CAT? Well, consider Hilary Putnam's notion (Putnam 1962) that cats may turn out to be alien automata that we humans (and our dogs) have been hoodwinked into believing are animals:

(34) A cat is an automaton.

In a Putnam world, (34) is true by definition. But in the real world (22) is true and I am confident in declaring that (34) is false. So, once again, under close examination truth is contingent on the world being spoken of (C1).

IX. In conclusion

At the outset to this essay I quoted from Lawrence Durrell's novel *Mountolive*. As the perceptive reader will have noticed, Balthazar makes an assumption that I cannot agree with. When he says 'But we always see her [truth] as she seems, never as she is' there is the traditional presupposition that truth exists independently of the way truth is conceived of by 'each man': I dispute that in this essay. This does raise the question of how a person arrives at their version of the truth, and I will come back to that.

For the Ancient Greek philosophers, truth was an important means of establishing the relationships between things, important for the drawing of rationally justifiable inferences, for distinguishing fact from fiction, reality from myth, truth from mistaken illusion, what is, from what is not. Their motivation was to establish a way to choose among what I have called alternative truths. This essay claims that such a goal necessarily involves taking an ideological perspective on what is perceived and accepted as the sole truth. In other words, it is prejudiced. It may be socially acceptable to adopt such an ideological stance, such a weltanschauung, but it ought to be recognized that there exist different weltanschauungen that favour alternative truths. These weltanschauungen constitute the context that determines the alternative truths – hence, truth is what the context makes of it. The truth value assigned to the proposition *God exists* starkly illustrates this claim, but I have demonstrated in the course of this essay that alternative truths are widespread and that conflicting truths can co-exist within a community even when they create dissension. A hegemonic

group will assert a preference for one truth over its alternatives, but that does not eliminate the existence of those alternative truths.

One reviewer of this essay wrote:

> the author defends the idea of the contextuality of the truth. In my opinion this thesis can only be applied to ordinary language. Not in science, because here it is impossible that conflicting truths can coexist.

I would dispute the ideological stance that so-called scientific truths are absolute: advances in science show that to be too optimistic. Nonetheless I personally prefer science-based 'truths'.

The existence of contradictory alternative truths within a community is by no means outlandish. Speakers and writers and their audiences can happily operate using a word or phrase with contrary meanings because they can rely on C1 and C2 to disambiguate. This is clearly witnessed by the existence of contronyms[3] in the vocabulary of English, e.g. *bound* "fastened to a spot" vs "heading for somewhere"; *cleave* "adhere to" vs "separate"; *consult* "offer advice" vs "seek advice"; *dust* "remove fine particles" vs "cover with fine particles"; *fast* "moving quickly" vs "fixed, unable to move"; *give out* "provide, supply" vs "stop for lack of supply"; *hold up* "support" vs "impede"; *overlook* "supervise" vs "neglect"; *sanction* "approve" vs "boycott"; *trim* "decorate" vs "remove excess from"; etc. Some contronyms are controversial, for instance *infer* is used to mean both "imply by saying" and "understand from what is said"; *rent* and *let*[4] can both be ambiguous between "allow the use of something in return for being paid» and «use something in return for payment to the owner". Similar to contronyms is the phenomenon of subversion/reclamation of slurs such as *bitch, cunt, nigger* (Allan 2020b). A community that is able to manage such opposed meanings can surely also manage alternative truths arising from differing weltanschauungen.

Admitting that there are alternative truths is to admit the possibility that there is an unbounded number of them. This is not radical given that there are no rational grounds for putting an upper bound on the number of models of a natural phenomenon.

---

3 Also called *contranyms* and autoantonyms, among other things.

4 There are also the verb let "allow" as in *Let me pay* and the noun let "hindrance" as in tennis (when during service a ball is hindered by the net cord).

> Philosophers of science have repeatedly demonstrated that more than one theoretical construction can always be placed upon a given collection of data. (Kuhn 1970: 76)
>
> A theory is just a model of the universe, or a restricted part of it, and a set of rules that relate quantities in the model to observations that we make. It exists only in our minds and does not have any other reality (whatever that might mean). A theory is a good theory if it satisfies two requirements: It must accurately describe a large class of observations on the basis of a model that contains only a few arbitrary elements, and it must make definite predictions about the results of future observations. (Hawking 1988: 9)

To «accurately describe a large class of observations» is where truth re-enters the picture. Robert Pirsig overstates the case when he writes "The number of rational hypotheses that can explain any given phenomenon is infinite" (Pirsig 1976: 107): in fact, the number is unbounded rather than 'infinite'. Albert Einstein agrees that, theoretically, there is

> any number of possible systems [= models] of theoretical physics, all equally well justified. ('Principles of research' Einstein 1973: 221)

Given that each model is evaluated for true application to the data modelled, there is an unbounded number of truths. So how does any individual choose among them? In the light of all I have said in this essay, it has to be according to the set of perceptions, conceptions, and beliefs that constitute the individual's weltanschauung at the time the judgment is made.

Acknowledgments

I am very grateful to have been invited to participate in the monographic volume *Philosophy of what we must pass over in silence. Central topics of Philosophy of Language in homage to Pedro Chamizo.* For about two decades I have very much enjoyed interactions in person and electronically with Pedro Chamizo Domínguez whose scholarship and character I revere.

I also wish to thank the reviewers of my essay for their helpful and insightful comments. All remaining faults are my responsibility alone.

Bibliographic references

Allan, K. (2001): *Natural Language Semantics*. Oxford & Malden MA: Blackwell.

Allan, K. (2018): Getting a grip on context as a determinant of meaning. In A. Capone, M. Carapezza and F. Lo Piparo (eds) *Further Advances in Pragmatics and Philosophy. Part 1. From Theory to Practice*, Cham: Springer, pp. 177-201.

Allan, K. (2020a): On cups. In K. Allan (ed.) *Dynamic Language Changes: Looking Within and Across Languages,* Singapore: Springer Nature, pp. 125-137.

Allan, K. (2020b): The semantics and pragmatics of three potential slurring terms. In K. Mullan, B. Peeters and L. Sadow (eds) *Studies in Ethnopragmatics, Cultural Semantics, and Intercultural Communication: Ethnopragmatics and Semantic Analysis*, Singapore: Springer, pp. 163-183.

Allan, K. (2023): The interdependence of common ground and context. In I. Kecskes (ed.) *Common Ground in First Language and Intercultural Interaction.* Berlin: De Gruyter. DOI 10.1515/9783110766752-002

Aristotle (1984): *The Complete Works of Aristotle. The Revised Oxford Translation.* Ed. by Jonathan Barnes. Bollingen Series 71. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Davidson, D. (1967): Truth and meaning. *Synthese* 17: 304-23.

Durrell, L. (2012): *The Alexandria Quartet*. [First published 1962]. London Faber & Faber.

Einstein, A. (1972): *Ideas and Opinions*. Laurel edn. New York: Dell. [First published 1954].

Giora, R. (2003): *On Our Mind: Salience, Context, and Figurative Language*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Gray, J. (1992): *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus: a practical guide for improving communication and getting what you want in your relationships*. New York: HarperCollins.

Grice, H.P. (1975): Logic and conversation. In P. Cole and J.L. Morgan (eds) *Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech Acts*, New York: Academic Press, pp. 41–58.

Hawking, S.W. (1988): *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes*. London: Bantam.

Hume, D. (1760): Of the standard of taste. In *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects.* Vol. I. London: A. Millar, pp. 363-395.

Kuhn, T.S. (1970): *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. International Encyclopaedia of Unified Science. 2nd edn. Chicago: Chicago University Press [First edn 1962.].

Lewis, D. (1968): Counterpart theory and quantified modal logic. *Journal of Philosophy* 65: 113-126.

Lewis, D. (1986): *On the Plurality of Worlds*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Locke, J. (1694): *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding: In Four Books.* 2nd edn. London: For Thomas Dring and Samuel Manship.

Moore, G.E. (1902): Truth. In J.M. Baldwin (ed.) *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology. Vol. 2*, London: Macmillan, pp. 716-718.

Pirsig, R.M. (1976): *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. London: Corgi.

Putnam, H. (1962): It ain't necessarily so. *Journal of Philosophy* 59: 658-71.

Quine, W.V.O. (1960): *Word and Object*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.

Searle, J.R. (1980): The background of meaning. In J.R. Searle, F. Kiefer and M. Bierwisch (eds) *Speech Act Theory and Pragmatics*, Dordrecht: Reidel, pp. 221-232.

Shapin, S. (1994): *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Strawson, P.F. (1950): On referring. *Mind* 59: 320–44.

Tarski, A. (1956): The concept of truth in formalized languages. In *Logic, Semantics, Metamathematics: Papers from 1923-1938*. Transl. by J.H. Woodger. Oxford Clarendon Press, pp. 152-278.

Zadeh, L.A. (1965): Fuzzy sets. *Information and Control* 8: 338-353.

Zadeh, L.A. (1971): Quantitative fuzzy semantics. *Information Sciences* 3: 159-176.

Zadeh, L.A. (1972): A fuzzy-set-theoretic interpretation of linguistic hedges. *Journal of Cybernetics* 2: 4–34.

Keith Allan is MLitt, PhD (Edinburgh), FAHA and Emeritus Professor at Monash University (Australia). He was a recipient of the Centenary Medal for Service to Australian Society and the Humanities in Linguistics and Philology in 2003. On several editorial boards and from 2007-2019 Editor in Chief of the *Australian Journal of Linguistics*.

Research lines:
- Language as a form of social interactive behaviour
- Meaning in language
- History and Philosophy of Linguistics

Relevant publications:
- (Eds.) (2020). *Dynamics of Language Changes: Looking Within and Across Languages.* Singapore: Springer Nature.
- (Eds.) (2020). *The Oxford Handbook of Taboo Words and Language.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- (Eds.) (2015). *The Routledge Handbook of Linguistics.* Abingdon: Routledge.
- (Eds.) (2013). *Oxford Handbook of the History of Linguistics.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- with Jaszczolt, K. (eds.) (2012). *Cambridge Handbook of Pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Electronic address: keith.allan@monash.edu