

Susan Haack: *Putting Philosophy to Work. Inquiry and Its Place in Culture. Essays on Science, Religion, Law, Literature, and Life*, Expanded Edition, New York, Prometheus Books, 2013

Reviewed by Teodor Dima

In the preface to the expanded edition of the volume reviewed here, Susan Haack, Distinguished Professor in the Humanities, Cooper Senior Scholar in Arts and Sciences, professor of philosophy, and professor of law at the University of Miami, explains its genesis as follows: "... after the publication of my *Evidence and Inquiry* (1993), *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate* (1998), and *Defending Science—Within Reason* (2003), I received such a variety of intriguing invitations – from people in the natural, the medieval, and the social sciences, from scholars in literature and scholars in law, from humanists and theologians, even from professors of architecture and the editors of an avant-garde art magazine – asking me to write or speak about the bearing of my work on their concerns" (p. 12). At the same time, these invitations were challenges to new research topics and answers regarding the epistemological significance of several concepts always debated in specialized literature: "truth; evidence; fact; objectivity; bias; self-deception; reason and the emotions; the demands of rationality and the limits of formalism; the ways in which unbiased inquiry differs from advocacy research, and inquiry in the sciences from inquiry in other fields; the threats to the integrity of the scientific enterprise posed by pressures from political and commercial interests; the difficulties our legal system has had in handling the scientific (and quasi-scientific) testimony so often crucial to the reduction of key factual issues; the tensions between science and religion; the possibility of learning true things from works of fiction; and even what gives human lives meaning" (p. 12). Through the essays reunited in this volume, Susan Haack wishes to convince the readers that philosophical analysis and reflection can influence people's conceptions of life.

I must confess, from the beginning, that I find the author's opinion according to which readers familiar with academic philosophy today may be skeptical of the real-world relevance of philosophy, pessimistic. I do believe that, like myself, many of the readers still accept, along with Susan Haack, that

philosophical reflection must be relevant to the real world. And I do agree with the author when, following William James (p. 21), she accepts that the most desirable way of practicing philosophy nowadays is to track patterns and principles without losing sight of particulars, and to engage with the relevant issues of culture without sacrificing clarity and rigour (p. 21).

Obviously, this is the path of philosophical reflection that Susan Haack (in my view, successfully) takes with her second, expanded edition of *Putting Philosophy to Work*. I believe that her choice is salutary, since I, too, believe that she is right in noticing that philosophy at present faces two opposite dangers: to either engage with concerns that are too particular, at the expense of clarity and rigorous abstraction (as, for instance, radical neo-pragmatists, feminists or post-colonialists do, generating “more heat than light”); or to aspire at high standards of rigor, failing to engage with general concerns, as, for instance, neo-analytic philosophy does.

The picture of recent philosophy resulting from these insights is both bewildering and disappointing: neo-analytic philosophy has become more tempered since it lost the tendency to take possession of other philosophical fields; postmodernism abandoned some of its favourite topics proving itself inconstant; some philosophical writings are intoxicated with extravagances that obscure their originality, others are hermetic because of the unnecessary use of formalisms, and others deal with aspects that are philosophically insignificant.

I think this is the reason why Susan Haack engages with the previously mentioned path, putting, indeed, philosophy to work in the twenty essay-like chapters of the volume, with clarity and rigour, the way she learned it from the first pragmatists: Pierce, James, Dewey, and Mead. Moreover, out of correctitude, she admits there is a certain affinity between her book and *Philosophy and Civilization* by John Dewey. Of course, Haack’s social conclusions are quite different from Dewey’s and she also speaks from an epistemological rather than a political perspective. However, the subtitle, *Inquiry and Its Place in Culture*, indicates that philosophy should be engaged on the real life level in order to play the role of an active cultural factor.

The book deals with a diverse range of cultural questions – vital issues about science, society, religion, law, and literature, even about what makes a life meaningful. Thus, in the first essay, “Staying for an Answer: The Untidy Process of Groping for Truth,” the author argues against the cynicism of those who profess to believe that the ideal of honest, unbiased inquiry (an ideal that Susan Haack pursued through all her career) is nothing but a smoke-screen disguising the covert operation of power, politics and rhetoric. She argues that “these cynics’

supposedly sophisticated disillusionment is really a quite crude, and an entirely factitious, despair. The ideal of honest inquiry is a robust one, well worth aspiring to. Granted, finding things out can be enormously difficult. Evidence can be hard to come by and, when we get it, may be overwhelmingly complex or seductively misleading. Moreover, our fragile will to find things out,” she maintains, “is only too easily undermined, only too readily diverted into pseudo-inquiry, self-deception, self-indulgent fantasy, or complacent confidence. But there is no need to give up on the objectivity of truth or evidence, or on the possibility of finding things out. What we need, rather, is to articulate a realistic understanding of the scope, limitations, and defects of the capacity for inquiry that all normal human beings share, and of the special capacities and quirks of individual minds – an understanding both of the possibilities and of the pitfalls of human beings’ ability to inquire, to figure things out” (p. 23).

The purpose of the next essay, “The Same, Only Different,” is to show that inquiry is different from other human activities, such as dancing, cookery, storytelling, advocacy, etc. To inquire means to search for the truth taking into account the nature of that particular field: natural sciences, social sciences, law, literature, history, philosophy, morality, etc.

There is a similar problem as truth is concerned, Haack argues in the essay “The Unity of Truth and the Plurality of Truths.” There is one truth, one unambiguous, non-relative truth-concept; and to say that a claim is true is to say (not that anyone, or everyone, believes it, or that it follows from this or that theory, or that there is good evidence for it, but) simply that things are as it says. But there are many truths of many different kinds, in many different vocabularies – empirical, logical, mathematical, historical, legal, literary, and so on.

It is of real interest to pay attention, here as well, to the author’s critical position towards Karl Popper’s philosophy of science, first expressed in her doctoral thesis and in all her published works afterwards. Perhaps, *Putting Philosophy to Work* is the most recent and devastating critique of his (unfortunately, in Haack’s view) still influential conception. In the previously published essay “Trial and Error: The Supreme Court’s Philosophy of Science,” Susan Haack discusses the *Daubert* case, the first US Supreme Court ruling on the standards of admissibility of scientific testimony. What is the best way for the legal system to use scientific expertise? In Haack’s view, not the way in which Justice Blackmun mixes elements from Karl Popper’s and Carl Hempel’s conceptions of science in order to discriminate between scientific and unscientific testimony. On one hand, the two conceptions are mutually incompatible; on the other hand, because Popper’s criterion of demarcation between scientific and

unscientific statements (according to which a genuinely scientific statements must be “testable” – meaning, in Popper’s words, “refutable” or “falsifiable,” i.e., susceptible to evidence that could potentially show it to be false – if it *is* false) is radically unsuited for the use to which the Supreme Court put it in *Daubert*. That is, because, first, as Justice Blackmun himself put it, one must acknowledge the “important differences between the quest for truth in the courtroom and the quest for truth in the laboratory” (p. 157); and, second, because “the legal system sometimes asks more of science than science can give, demanding definite answers to scientific questions when no such answers are yet to be had (...)” (p. 158).

Susan Haack emphasizes the tension between fallibilism and finality in the legal system. On one hand, not all scientific theories are supported by good evidence and, as the history of science showed so far, most get discarded as the evidence turns against them. This process goes along the lines of Popper’s epistemological conception according to which the “conjecture and refutation” scientific method is critical: making a bold, highly falsifiable guess, testing it as severely as possible, and, if it is found to be false, giving it up and starting over rather than protecting it by *ad hoc* or “conventionalist” modifications. (Readiness to accept falsification, and repudiation of *ad hoc* stratagems to protect a theory from contrary evidence is Popper’s “methodological criterion” of the genuinely scientific.) Indeed, the author admits, “preparedness to revise even the most entrenched claim in the face of the unfavorable evidence is essential to scientific inquiry” (p. 158). But, on the other hand, in law a quick, final and binding judgement must be reached, however weak or defective the available evidence may be. This is why it is still difficult to adapt science to the U.S. legal culture, especially in the case of the legal rules of admissibility.

In maybe the most critical position against Karl Popper’s philosophy of science that I have seen so far, the essay “Just say ‘No’ to Logical Negativism,” Susan Haack labels his conception as a covert skepticism: if, as Popper says, induction is not acceptable, we have no reason to believe that a theory tested today would pass the same test tomorrow; and, if, as he maintains, again, the criterion of acceptance for basic sentences is not observation, but mutual agreement between the members of the scientific community, there is no guarantee that a “falsified” scientific statement is, actually, false; this “implies that scientific claims can no more be shown to be false than they can be shown to be true” (p. 183). If Popper’s “Logical Negativism were true,” Susan Haack maintains, “what we call ‘scientific knowledge’ could be nothing but *a web of unjustified and unjustifiable conjectures anchored in unjustified and unjustifiable decisions on the part of the scientific community*” (p. 183, her emphasis).

Nevertheless, his criterion of demarcation is a very important element of his philosophy of science: falsification distinguishes between empirical sciences (e.g., Einstein's theory of relativity) and pre-scientific myths, or non-empirical disciplines such as pure (abstract) mathematics, or metaphysics, or non-scientific disciplines such as history, or pseudo-scientific theories such as Freud's and Adler's psychoanalytic theories, and Marx's "scientific socialism." Here, again Susan Haack puts her analytic skills to work and identifies places in Popper's work where he is not consistent with his declared intentions. For instance, although he always insisted on the importance of distinguishing genuine science from pretenders, Popper acknowledges from the beginning, in *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* that his criterion of demarcation is a "convention;" and in 1959, in his introduction to the English edition of *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, he even mentions that scientific knowledge is continuous with common sense knowledge; and in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* Popper acknowledges that "the problem with orthodox Marxism was not, after all, that it was unfalsifiable; in fact, it was falsified by the events of the Russian Revolution" (p. 184).

Haack presents the Popperian methodology in order to see the extent to which it can be applied to test theories. Her answer is pessimistic in this regard, and complies with the Critical Common-sensist theory that she develops in another important book she authored, *Defending Science—Within Reason*: a theory which, in her author's words, "is not skeptical, but fallibilist; it focuses less on demarcation than on continuities between scientific and other kinds of empirical inquiry; and is not purely logical, but worldly – not confined exclusively to statements and their logical relations, but also giving a role to the world and scientists' interactions with it" (p. 190). It is a theory which rejects, as Popper does, the viability of inductive logic and the defensibility of probabilism, but accepts, as Popper does not, the legitimacy of the idea of supportive-but-not-conclusive-evidence. And I do believe, in agreement with Susan Haack, that if there is a theory that can help us see how the world is, her Critical Common-sensism is perhaps the best theory that could explain us how to do so.

Undoubtedly, a professor myself, I cannot finish this review without saying a word about the last essay of the book, "Out of Step: Academic Ethics in a Preposterous Environment." I cannot but agree with Susan Haack when she writes that "as time passes, the erosion feeds on itself, and the pace of decline quickens – until we find ourselves in an environment in which an academic who conducts his (or her) professional life in a way truly in accordance with its real ethical demands is likely to find himself at a real professional disadvantage, 'out of step' with the new ethos of the academy" (p. 33). But I am optimistic in this regard, and I do

believe that the “academic virtues” that she highlights: industry, patience, persistence, judgement, integrity, focus, realism, impartiality, independence, consideration and courage are still to be found in universities today and may still shape the future of academy as long as we carry our job in accordance to them.

Together with the ones that I mentioned here, all the other essays included in the book, from “An Epistemologist Among the Epidemiologists” to “After my Own Heart: Dorothy Sayer’s Feminism” are a sound proof of how pragmatism is developing today in the United States; and I take the opportunity here to express my sincere belief that it can bear a relevant influence on the European thinking, as well. Through her two major objectives: to prove that the issues concerning evidence, justified belief, and truth are wrongly approached by some of the recent philosophers, such as the radical neo-pragmatists, the feminist epistemologists, and the postmodernists, and to prove the active role of philosophy by describing its implications in science, religion, law, literature, and life; through her remarkably clean and rigorous style; through her reasonable, original and forceful arguments, Susan Haack succeeds, once again, in delivering a milestone of the English-speaking philosophy of today.