PHILOSOPHY SOUTH

Realism, irrealism and truth[1]

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to analize whether Goodman's pluralism leaves room for a correspondentist version of truth, in spite of his explicit rejection of this. I will argue that Goodman associates the notion of correspondence exclusively with the perspective of traditional metaphysical realism that he refuses; but *pace* Goodman, it is perfectly possible to reconcile his pluralism with a correspondence theory of truth. I think that unless pluralism and the correspondence theory of truth can be combined, Goodman's position is unsustainable due to restrictions he imposes to pluralism.

Keywords: Nelson Goodman, irrealism, correspondence theory of truth.

Introduction

In *Ways of Worldmaking* (1978), Nelson Goodman presents his view on the existence of a plurality of *not discovered worlds* that are *constructed* from previous worlds. His aim is to reject several thesis associated whith metaphysical realism. The most common version of realism seems to include three beliefs: (i) there is a single world; (ii) the world is independent of mind and language; (iii) there is a single true complete description of the world. Faced with these beliefs, Goodman postulates the existence of a plurality of worlds shaped by a variety of forms of organization imposed by ourselves, a multifaceted variety of constructed worlds. Goodman called "irrealism" his position and presented it as "a radical relativism under rigorous restraints" (Goodman, 1978, p. x). He later characterized it as an intermediate position between anti-realism and anti-idealism (Goodman, 1996, p. 203).

His criticism of the idea of an independent world is also combined with a rejection of the correspondence theory of truth, which he considers as an essential component of traditional realism. Several very different theories have been offered to explain the concept of truth, but concerning the aims of this paper it will be necessary to refer only to the conception of truth as correspondence and the coherence theory of truth.

The correspondence theory of truth, broadly speaking, argues that there is a relationship of agreement or conformity between a belief or a statement and a fact. One of the first formulations cited in this regard is that of Aristotle: "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" (*Metaphysics*, 1011b25). Given Aristotle's metaphysical convictions on the existence of an independent reality, the correspondence theory is usually associated with metaphysical realism. While some authors have emphasized the metaphysical aspect pointing out that what is important is the conformity between what is claimed and reality, others take in account that Aristotle does not explicitly mention such a relationship of correspondence and favor a semantic interpretation that is summed up in the idea of that what the statement means exists.

Coherence theories of truth state that truth is a relationship between propositions, in principle, consistency between them. Thus, a proposition is true to the extent that it can coherently

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be included in a system of propositions. We do not find here any reference to facts or objects to which these propositions have to be accommodated.

Goodman's explicit relativism resulting from the thesis of the existence of a plurality of worlds, suggests, as himself does, that his ideas can't be reconciled with truth as correspondence. This suggests that it could be attributed to him an inclination towards a coherence theory of truth. But, as we shall see, the situation is not necessarily so.

It is true that Goodman argues for relativism. But this is not a radical relativism, not everything goes, because we always start from a previous version or from some old world (Goodman, 1978, p. 97). Goodman introduces here two terms – "world" and "version" – which have promted some objections. Indeed, on the one hand, Goodman postulates a plurality of worlds; on the other hand, he claims that there is a plurality of versions. There can be no further doubt, then, that world and version are different things. One would think that given some world (whether unique or not) it can be provided different descriptions of that world, and each of them would be a version of that world. However, Goodman often seems to confuse both concepts, as will be shown below. Furthermore, a version is considered true only if it does not violate any belief firmly believed by us, nor transgress any rules or guidelines associated with them. This has led many authors to think that that coherentism is the only criterion underlying Goodman's conception of truth. This paper analyzes exactly this issue. The main question is whether Goodman ultimately sticks to a coherence conception of truth or whether there is still room for a correspondentist version of the truth, despite his explicit rejection of this. In what follows, I will restrict the discussion to worlds involving the notion of truth; I will put aside the metaphorical, artistic, undeclarative versions where Goodman prefers to speak of "correction" instead of "truth" (Goodman, 1984, p. 196).

I will argue that Goodman associates the notion of correspondence exclusively with the perspective of traditional metaphysical realism that he refuses. Although I will not plead for or against *irrealism*, I will argue that it is perfectly possible to reconcile pluralism with a correspondence theory of truth. I think that unless pluralism and the correspondence theory of truth can be combined, Goodman's position is incomprehensible due to special restrictions that he imposes to pluralism.

Relativism *versus* Absolutism

In "The Way the World Is" (1960), Nelson Goodman presents his peculiar pluralism as the polar opposite of "absolutism" (Goodman, 1960, p. 56). From this perspective, he formulates his criticism of the picture theory of language and underlying assumptions about "the given world", something with order and structure that language reflects like a photograph or a copy. According to Goodman, the structure of a description could not conform to the structure of the world, for there is no such thing as the structure of the world. There is no way that is the way the world is. The question of how

the world is becomes meaningless since there is no single real world that is independent of us. Goodman rejects both the picture theory of language and the theory of truth understood as a correspondence between language and the world as it is usually associated with traditional realism.

However, it is not the idea of a plurality of worlds and the rejection of the correspondence theory associated with realism that makes Goodman's position attractive. These ideas have some antecedents in the history of philosophy. The peculiarity of Goodman's doctrine resides in the fact that the plurality of constructed worlds allows for the coexistence of incompatible versions, all of which are true. Goodman himself asks the following questions: In just what sense are there many worlds? And what is the relation between worlds and versions? He answers these questions in different chapters of *Ways of Worldmaking*.

Goodman's worlds are worlds built into the various disciplines, such as physics, psychology, music, biology, visual arts, etc. The symbolic forms through which worlds are constructed go beyond the limits set by theories, descriptions, statements, and language; they include not only literal but metaphorical, pictorial, and musical versions.

An important point is that Goodman denies that the plurality of versions is a set of versions of the same events. That is, the statements (i) "The Earth always stands still" and (ii) "The Earth dances the role of Petrouchka" appear to conflict because each implies the negation of the other. However, according to Goodman, although both versions are incompatible, both are true in different worlds: the first in the Ptolemaic world and the second in a Stravinskian world (Goodman, 1978, p. 111).

Although the notion of a plurality of worlds seems far from Kantian, Goodman acknowledges an affinity with regard to the idea "that the notion of pure content is an empty notion" (Goodman, 1978, p. 6). It is contradictory to speak of an unstructured or no-conceptualized content, a substrate that lacks properties, since this way of speaking already conceptualizes the object and imposes properties and structures. Kant said that perceptions without concepts are blind and concepts without perceptions are empty. Goodman says that "we can have words without a world but no world without words or other symbols" (Goodman, 1978, p. 6).

The peculiar constructivism of Goodman's pluralism is apparent in the title of the sixth chapter of *Ways of Worldmaking*: "The Fabrication of Facts".

> *My title, 'The Fabrication of Facts', has the virtue not only of indicating pretty clearly what I am going to discuss but also of irritating those fundamentalists who know very well that facts are found not made, that facts constitute the one and only real world, and that knowledge consists of believing the facts. These articles of faith so firmly possess most of us, they so bind and blind us, that 'fabrication of fact' has a paradoxical sound (Goodman, 1978, p. 91).*

However paradoxical it may seem, the forms of organization "are not 'found in the world' but *built into a world*" (Goodman, 1978, p. 14) through processes such as composition and decomposition, weighting, sorting, deletion, supplementation, deformation, and others. To illustrate just one of these, let's take the case of the mechanism of ordering: "Worlds not differing in entities or emphasis may differ in ordering" (Goodman, 1978, p. 12). So, for instance, from a world composed of three elements we can build another, say a Leśniewskian world, of seven or eight elements.

Accepting the existence of countless alternative versions does not however mean that anything goes: the recognition that there are many alternative versions does not mean adoopting a *laissez faire* policy. Goodman recognizes the normative value of criteria for distinguishing the correct version from wrong versions. We can not build a correct version by chance; worlds are not "made" by chance, for we always start with some old version or some old world, to which we are "tied": "Worldmaking begins with one version and ends with another" (Goodman, 1978, p. 97). Among these old worlds there are those configured according to the laws of logic or those resulting from some perceptions[3], or others still built from convictions or prejudices impregnated with varying degrees of firmness. Thus, Goodman seems to put some brake on the imagination and avoids committing himself to a complete relativism.

We can ask whether Goodman's constructivism belongs to the epistemic level or, on the contrary, whether it reaches the realm of ontology. We will discuss this issue in the next section.

Worldmaking or versionmaking?

Goodman's pluralism led Israel Scheffler to wonder whether building worlds is simply building versions, descriptions or other representations. Thus, in "The Wonderful Worlds of Goodman" (1980), Scheffler charges Goodman with using the notion of world ambiguously: on the one hand, there is a *versional interpretation*, where a world is just a true (or correct) version; on the other hand, there is an *objectual interpretation* where a world is a realm of things described or referred by a correct version. In the latter case, talking about worlds would not be simply talking about conflicting versions. Scheffler stresses that Goodman insists on "multiple actual worlds" and that this should not "be passed over as purely rhetorical" (Scheffler, 1980, p. 201).

Each of these interpretations is supported by Goodman's claims, which Scheffler quotes as grounds for his criticism. Concerning the identification of worlds with versions, Scheffler stresses Goodman's words: "With false hope of a firm foundation gone, *with the world displaced by worlds that are but versions* […] we face the questions how *worlds* are made, tested, and known" (Goodman, 1978, p. 7 *in* Scheffler, 1980, p. 202, Scheffler's emphasis). Without doubt Goodman is here thinking of worlds and versions as the same kind of things. Scheffler quotes many passages with this use of the term "world".

As for the objectual interpretation, Scheffler quotes passages in which Goodman used the term "world" together with expressions such as "real" and "refer". Talk of the "real world" or of "versions that refer and versions that do not refer" seems to admit only the objectual interpretation with respect the term world. In addition, Scheffler quotes passages in which Goodman alludes to worlds as constituting the field of application of predicates or areas of things to which versions apply.

In other fragments, the versional interpretation and the objectual interpretation come together. In order to support his conclusion, Scheffler mentions the following example:

> "Of course", he writes, "we want to distinguish between versions that do and those that do not refer, and to talk about the things and worlds, if any, referred to: but these things and worlds and even the stuff they are made of-matter, anti-matter, mind, energy, or what not-are fashioned along with the versions themselves" (p. 96) (Scheffler, 1980, p. 205).

Nevertheless, there is a problema here because the quotation is not absolutely accurate.[4] On the page mentioned by Scheffler (p. 96), Goodman's words were:

> Of course, we want to distinguish between versions that do and those that do not refer, and to talk about the things and worlds, if any, referred to; but these things and worlds and even the stuff they are made of-matter, anti-matter, mind, energy, or whatnot-are fashioned along with the things and worlds themselves (Goodman, 1978, p. 96).

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[3] One might think that a plurality of versions, including those that are incompatible but equally admissible with respect to a certain world, might be assimilated to the theoretical pluralism advocated by van Fraassen. Incompatible versions would resemble the incompatibility of theories that could be, nevertheless, empirically equivalent and therefore equally sustainable. However, there are important differences between the two authors. In van Fraassen's case, his attitude is realistic about the observable world and even though he admits the coexistence of incompatible theories does not think that more than one of them are true. Moreover, the condition required by van Fraassen, empirical adequacy, refers to the truth of the theory with respect to all observable phenomena that would make up a unique world. So, for instance, if a scientific theory T1 and a scientific theory T2 say incompatible things about unobservable aspects of the world but both theories agree concerning all directly observable phenomena, van Fraassen would say that only one of them could be true. On the contrary, Goodman would say that both theories could be simultaneously true, each one concerning it respective world, and the two worlds (among many others) are real.

[4] I thank an anonimous reviewer for pointing to me Scheffler's mistake quoting Goodman.

Scheffler seems to have commited a mistake. But we can ask what Goodmans's words mean. To say that worlds and things are fashioned along with the things and worlds themselves seems to be a kind of tautology. Perhaps Goodman wanted to reinforce the fact that things and worlds are always constructed. But, any way the confusión of concept of worlds and the concept of versión remain. Recall that as we noted above Goodman says that we build worlds from old versions. So, eventually, Scheffler seems to be rigth in attributing an ambiguous use of both concepts.

Scheffler then states his central criticism: "Now the claim that it is we who made the stars by making the word 'star' I consider absurd, taking this claim in its plain and literal sense" (Scheffler, 1980, p. 205). According to Scheffler, this amounts to confusing speech features with aspects of what speech refers to; and it even collides with Goodman's distinction between a version and that to which the version refers.

Sheffler concludes that Goodman cannot say "we make worlds by making versions", as he does (Goodman, 1978, p. 94) and that, in spite of Goodman's disclaimer (Goodman, 1978, p. 110), objectual talk of worldmaking had *better* be taken as "purely rhetorical" (Scheffler, 1980, p. 208).

Pluralism and correspondentism

Goodman does not abandon the concept of truth but reiterates time and again that he does not use the notion of truth in a correspondentist way. From this insistence, many readers have drawn the conclusion that the only criterion of truth underlying Goodman's pluralism is plain coherentism. Thus, in "Comments on Goodman's Way of Worldmaking" (1980), Hempel compares Goodman's thesis with that of Neurath:

> But Neurath's formulations—and I think to some extent Goodman's—give rise to the uneasy feeling that we are being offered a coherence theory of knowledge, in which simplicity, scope, and coherence are the dominant requirements for acceptable theories; and one wonders how the empirical character of scientific claims or versions is accommodated in this conception of making version from version and adjudicating proposed hypotheses by their fit with the accepted system (Hempel, 1980, p. 196, my emphasis).

We must admit that many claims, as well as the name that Goodman chooses for his doctrine, "irrealism", suggest a coherentist reading. However, if coherentism was the only criterion for differentiating true versions from those that are not true, then it would be pointless to distinguish, for example, the factual from the fictional, as Goodman actually does:

> 'Fabrication' has become a synonym for 'falsehood' or 'fiction' as contrasted with 'truth' or 'fact'. Of course, we must distin-

guish falsehood and fiction from truth and fact; *but we cannot, I am sure, do it on the ground that fiction is fabricated and fact found (Goodman 1978, p. 91, my emphasis).*

I would like to offer a different interpretation. I think we ought pay attention to some passages in which Goodman makes explicit his agreement with Kant:

> I think of this book as belonging in that mainstream of modern philosophy that began when Kant exchanged the structure of the world for the structure of the mind, continued when C. I. Lewis exchanged the structure of the mind for the structure of concepts, and that now proceeds to exchange the structure of concepts for the structure of the several symbol systems of the sciences, philosophy, the arts, perception, and everyday discourse. The movement is from unique truth and a world fixed and found to a diversity of right and even conflicting versions or worlds in the making (Goodman, 1978, p. x).

Furthermore, when he refers to the plurality of worlds and the impossibility of a unique, unconceptualized given world, Goodman again stresses his affinity (in spite of some differences) with Kant:

> The non-Kantian theme of a multiplicity of worlds is closely akin to the Kantian theme of the vacuity of the notion of pure content. The one denies us a unique world, the other the common stuff of which worlds are made. Together these theses defy our intuitive demand for something stolid underneath, and threaten to leave us uncontrolled, spinning out our own inconsequent fantasies.
> The overwhelming case against perception without conception, the pure given, absolute immediacy, the innocent eye, substance as substratum, has been so fully and frequently set forth by Berkeley, Kant, Cassirer, Gombrich, Bruner, and many others—as to need no restatement here. Talk of unstructured content or an unconceptualized given or a substratum without properties is self-defeating; for the talk imposes structure, conceptualizes, ascribes properties (Goodman, 1978, p. 6).

The belief that the notion of a pure content is empty is also shared by Putnam, who holds a similar position in embracing internal realism (Putnam, 1981). Recall too that in *Realism with a Human Face* (1992 [1990]) Putnam refutes the idea of a "given" in the following terms:

> But the idea that we sometimes compare our beliefs directly with unconceptualized reality […] has come to seem untenable. Ac-

cess to the world is through our discourse and the role that discourse plays in our lives; we compare our discourse with the world as it is presented to us or constructed for us by discourse itself, making in the process new worlds out of old ones; and a psychological act of comparing our discourse with things as they are in themselves has come to have the status of a 'mystery act' (Putnam, 1992 [1990], p. 121, my emphasis).

If one were to read this passage without knowing the author, one might think that it was written by Goodman. Note the idea that we make worlds out of old ones. And also note his rejection of the correspondence theory of truth:

If objects are […] theory-dependent, then the whole idea of truth's being defined or explained in terms of a correspondence' between items in a language and items in a fixed theory-independent reality has to be given up. The picture I propose instead is not the picture of Kant's transcendental idealism, but it is certainly related to it (Putnam, 1992 [1990], p. 41).

Given these similarities, and given that Putnam recognizes the Kantian roots of his philosophy, why didn't he pick up the Kantian notion of truth? As McDermid documents it, Kant explicitly supports the correspondence theory of truth in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. There he says that truth consist "in the agreement of knowledge with its object" (Kant, 1999 [1781], A 58, A 191; McDermid, 1998, p. 17). Likewise, Kant conceived truth as the "the conformity of our concepts with the object" (Kant, 1999 [1781], A 642/B 670; McDermid, 1998, p. 18).[5]

According to McDermid, it would wrong to believe that the criterion for the correspondence of truth can only be maintained under the assumption that facts are independent of the mind. McDermid notes that Kant shows precisely that the rejection of the "given" is perfectly compatible with a correspondence definition of truth. So McDermid asserts that it is posible to reconcile correspondence with antirealism (McDermid, 1998, p. 27).

I think that McDermid's interpretation is perfectly applicable to Goodman's theory. Recall that in "The Way the World Is", Goodman crystallizes his criticism of the idea of a mind- and speech-independent "given" world. And in Ways of Worldmaking, he once again attacks the view he has characterized as a form of absolutism and the correspondence theory of truth with which it is associated. But note that Good-

man seems to make the same mistake McDermid attributes to Putnam in leaving aside Kant's recognition of a version of the correspondence theory of truth. Why should we assume that the correspondence theory implies the existence of an independent, non-conceptualized world? Why can't we reconcile the plurality of constructed worlds with a correspondence notion of truth?

Truth as correspondence can be understood en several ways. As we have seen above, correspondence admits at least two meanings: an eminently metaphysical sense, committed to the existence of an independent reality, and a semantic sense which only says that what a true proposition means exists. This second meaning of the notion of correspondence can be the bridge to reconcile Goodman's ontological pluralism with the notion of truth as correspondence.

A similar idea is presented by Peter Ludlow concerning Chomsky's doctrine (Ludlow, 2003). According to Ludlow, as the extent as for Chomsky language is not identified with something spoken or written but with an internal state that is part of our biological endowment, it would seem that he is obliged to reject the referential semantics since it expresses relationships between linguistic representations and aspects of the world which are external to the agent. However, Ludlow noted that Chomsky's position is not incompatible with a referentialist semantics *per se* but with the idea that there is an isomorphism between language and the world. If both issues, the possibility of reference, on the one hand, and the isomorphism, on the other hand, are separated, then the possibility of combining Chomsky's ideas with a referential semantics remains open.

Also, in our case, the compatibility between the abandonment of an independently estructured given world and truth as correspondence is plausible. The semantic version of the correspondence is akin to Goodman's insistence on that "we can have words without a world but no world without words or other symbols" (Goodman, 1978, p. 6).

To show the compatibility of a plurality of constructed worlds with a correspondence theory of truth we must stop associating correspondence with a world of independent events. Instead, we have to introduce the semantic conception of truth just explained and to apply it to plurality of worlds. Granted that a world is built nothing prevent us to understand the truth as correspondence; and there is no reason to abandon this idea if instead of one world we build many. Although there are no unconceptualized facts and we can speak of facts only from within a conceptual framework, from within a version, to use Goodman's words, and although as Quine says, ontology is always theoretically dependent, this situation does not force us to abandon the correspondence criterion of truth.

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[5] McDermid quoted also other occurrences of Kantian definition of truth: "The truth is the agreement of cognition with its object" (Kant, 1992b [1800], p. 557; McDermid, 1998, p. 18); "If a cognition does not agree with the character of the thing that we want to represent and to cognize, then it is false, in that it cannot subsist with truth. If on the other hand a cognition is in conformity with the character of the thing that we represent, then it is true" (Kant, 1992a [1770], p. 61; McDermid, 1998, p. 18).

I think that my Kantian/Putnamian reading of Goodman's doctrine allows us to articulate and reconcile passages from Goodman that would otherwise make his position incomprehensible. A purely coherentist reading of Goodman's position does not harmonize with the restrictions he imposed to the act of world making: "a radical relativism under rigorous restraints", to use his own words. And among these restrictions he includes the need to recognize some perceptions. But this reinforces the idea that he adheres to some sort of correspondence.

If the interpretation outlined here is accepted, we can admit that the worlds of science can be built, that there is a plurality of worlds, but the truth of each scientific version depends on correspondence with the "facts", although those facts are also part of a constructed world. And consequently, the cojunction of pluralism and correspondence might more apropriately characterize, at least in a sustainable way, the irrealism that Goodman attempts to develop.

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