

## Preposterism vs. The Pursuit of Truth

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I have had the good fortune of meeting Susan Haack personally, and my encounters with her have had a profound impact, not only on my understanding of philosophical issues and positions, but on my own practice and teaching of philosophy. Unquestionably, my encounters with Haack's texts, and with her, have made me a better professional; and I see no better space than this *Festschrift* to reflect on a topic that has concerned and occupied Susan Haack for some years. I refer to her work on intellectual ethics and the situation of research in the field of philosophy.

Susan Haack is one of the brightest minds in philosophy today. Her work has shaped the agendas of logic, the philosophy of language, epistemology, metaphysics, the philosophy of science, and the philosophy of law. But what strikes one the most about her work is the great coherence and cohesion of her thinking, so that each area of knowledge in which he has worked is mutual supportive of the others, and is at some point interwoven with the others. In this sense, it becomes very difficult to talk about Haack without doing her vast work a certain degree of injustice.

Having had personal contact with our author of honour and having been fortunate enough to carry out publication projects with her, I have got to know her way of working and the exhaustive care she puts into each text, whether for a renowned magazine or for a presentation at some little-known university. This care has extended to something that many philosophers today lack; an aesthetics of writing, which made her entirely worthy of the Ulysses medal from the University of Dublin in 2009.

This why I would here like to dwell on one profound and highly penetrating line of thought—though all of Haack's inquiries and reflections fit these descriptions—pertaining to the hard work of philosophical inquiry, which has radically transformed the way I understand, take up, and carry out work in this area of knowledge.

The way in which Haack's criticism of the current state of philosophical inquiry has affected me positively has its counterpart in how philosophy is conceived and carried out in our Latin American countries. A metaphor of Carlos Pereda illustrates this reality very well: in Latin America there is a "branch office fever." We study at world-renowned universities, are trained in certain authors and theories, and open a branch in some Latin American university devoted to what we have learned:<sup>1</sup> "Once the intellectual shop is up and running, it is set for life, operating in a slavishly disciplined manner, phenomenological, hermeneutic, logical-positivist, post-analytic, postmodern ..." (Pereda 2017, 63).

This way of doing philosophy is absolutely foreign to the principles that Peirce offers us: to develop any and every

inquiry that might be taken to be valuable, principles that Susan Haack takes up and from which serve as a starting point for her thinking. The interesting thing about these principles, and the thinking that derives from them, is that they are rooted in ethical conditions rather than in intellectual abilities, conditions that, nevertheless, have direct effects on the kind of reasoning involved in pursuing philosophical understanding.

Susan Haack identifies two types of so-called inquirers whose interests and motivation are a real obstacle to knowledge. The fake inquirer (or reasoner) on the one hand, and the sham inquirer/reasoner on the other. At first glance we might think of these two adjectives as synonymous, but Haack makes distinctions worth noting. The fake inquirer defends the truth of propositions for the sake of some extraneous benefit, for example of reputation, while not having an opinion about whether the propositions are in fact true or false, or indeed having any other attitude in particular towards them in themselves. Because of this, fake inquirers will obfuscate and hide behind “affected obscurity.” By contrast, the sham inquirer defends the truth of propositions to which he is already committed. His real interest is in amassing evidence, argument, and proof in favour of the propositions he defends, which means that he will avoid examining evidence that contradicts them too closely, will devalue it, or minimize its importance (S. Haack, 1998, 190).

The values and qualities required to do good work in philosophy appear to have been skewed; the peace of mind, creativity, patience, and time required for true philosophical effort have been replaced by the business and administrative skills needed to manage high-budget projects with an eye to efficiency and productivity. These distorted values are fomented, even celebrated, by university institutions as they have evolved in recent years and decades. The majority of Latin American universities have added to what is expected of their academics and researchers the ability to generate material resources. A good philosophical inquirer is no longer one who contributes to the generation of high quality knowledge, with a significant impact among the work of his colleague, and to the training of future professionals in philosophy, but—I would dare say that, mainly—a good researcher is instead one capable of garnering mega projects with large budgets with respect to which actual research work will take a back seat to the administration of material resources, to political relations, and to sheer power.

This immersion of philosophy in “a culture of grants and research projects”, in imitation of the sciences, creates favorable ground for the fakery and sham reasoning of which Haack speaks. It is an inhospitable environment for the fragile intellectual integrity required for genuine discovery. Long-term intellectual work, with uncertain results that can end in dead ends is overshadowed by exaggerated results, half-truths and absolute exaggerations about what has been achieved (S. Haack, 1998, 194-195). In drawing attention to this, Haack identified something fundamental; that the real problem lies, not with individual inquirers and their intellectual capacities and respect for genuine investigation, but in the inhospitable context for bringing ethical intellectual work to fruition: a context capable of extirpating intellectual virtue in those immersed in it from the beginning.

When choosing trivial topics, promising easily obtainable results, is encouraged, rewarded, and incentivized; and when problems are disguised rather than confronted, and strategies for dealing with them governed by fashion, allure, surprising obscurity or confusion, as opposed to deep, difficult and painful clarity we are, says Haack, in a hostile and unfertile environment for good research (S. Haack, 1998, 191-192).

Borrowing the term from Jacques Barzun, and giving the concept a Peircean dimension, Haack calls the specious reasoning that gives rise to and encompasses these ways of exercising philosophy “*preposterism*” (S. Haack, 1998, 188). Sham inquiry and fake inquiry are preposterous because what comes first is what should come last: preposterous reasoning seeks in advance to find arguments for the truth of propositions determined in advance.

As I hinted above, however, Haack’s work on the ethics of inquiry and what it takes to be a good philosopher is focused primarily not on finding fault with individual reasoners, but on the shaping force of institutional policies that undermine the virtues that enable the sort of inquiry desired in philosophy. It’s in institutional contexts that the “preposterization” of the practice of philosophy exercise is most evident, in promoting the inversion of values that holds sway in this field of knowledge. Virtues such as intellectual

honesty, persistence, good judgment in discriminating good work from shaky and shallow work, concentration, among other virtues, are hampered by the reigning demands, pressures, evaluations, and types of incentives. The result is not only bad philosophers but bad philosophy (Derpmann, Düber, Meyer, Rojek 2016, 150).

Where is the chief pressure and demand of this institutional context? In the concept “productivity”, something more appropriate, as Haack observes, for the manufacture of widgets than the advancement of knowledge. Productivity is what we see reflected in the ranking of publications, the ability to generate resources through mega projects whose problems or themes are seductive and alluring or passing fads or in the proliferation of publications in prestigious journals considered as vehicles more of the validation of authors than the dissemination of knowledge. These demands and standards of productivity disrupt the virtues and values that underpin intellectual work of quality and provoke, on the contrary, a “pandemic of sham reasoning” (Haack 1996, 1414-1415).

The consequence of this state of affairs for Latin American philosophy is devastating. On the one hand, most of the agendas of fashionable, attractive, problems require one, as Pereda points out, to be open, very open “to what is coming” (Pereda 2017, 63-64) with ephemeral and low-impact projects whose agendas arrive, with a delay of a few decades, from outside Latin America. On the other hand, one of the most frequently employed strategies for achieving those rankings and major publications, and this is not limited to the Latin American context, is to focus one’s academic life on the study of a single author or the discussion of problems in hyper-specialized fields.<sup>2</sup> This type of research often restricts itself to interpretations and re-interpretations, criticisms and defenses of very narrow points pertaining to extremely limited problems, so that its sphere of philosophical interest extends only to a very limited community. This absence of impetus to the advancement of knowledge does not worry such researchers too much because the core purpose of their work is to support their CVs, or the obtaining of academic positions, or status in their home departments and universities.

Dark though the outlook may be, Susan Haack’s reflections are a call, an opportune cry that demands radical, and, it should be noted, difficult transformations of a culture that prioritizes the quantitative over the qualitative, with profound implications for professional development and intellectual work. Betting on the values, virtues and paths that lead to serious research and good philosophical work can mean a reduction in recognition, collaboration, publications and jobs.

For these reasons, intellectual integrity can be extremely difficult to sustain in an adverse environment. But as Sara Barrena affirms in an excellent piece on the academic ethics of Susan Haack, “what should give meaning to academic life is the joint effort to get to the truth, inquiry motivated by the desire to know” (Barrena 2018, 459). In Peircean terms, the chief engine for intellectual integrity is the authentic desire to learn.

In the face of this great challenge with which Susan Haack’s reflections confront us, with and the possible institutional consequences for individual professional development, I close with exhortation from Haack prompted by the question whether criticism and denunciation of her opinions has not led to her being surrounded by enemies: “better ostracism than ostrich-ism” (Nemko 2016). This response not only invites us to emulate her high intellectual and ethical conduct, but admirably sums up the remarkable quality of Professor Susan Haack’s work.<sup>3</sup>

## NOTES

1. Pereda applies this metaphor, or vice in his words, to all philosophical thought in Spanish. In this text I will limit my reflection to the Latin American philosophical context based on the academic ethics of Susan Haack.
2. Susan Haack (2013) has a deep and timely reflection on the problem of hyper-specialization in "Out of step. Academic ethics in a preposterous environment."
3. I wish to thank Mark Migotti for inviting me to contribute to this *Festschrift* for Susan Haack and for his kind help with previous drafts.

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