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Modern Epistemology Against Analytic Philosophy: A Reply to Mäki

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I APPRECIATE the care and sympathy with which Uskali Mäki has read my books on how economists persuade. The nonphilosopher may find his analysis a bit elaborate for what are after all simple ideas—the ideas have to be simple for me to be able to hold them in mind. But overelaborate or not, his reading is notably accurate. I've had worse readers. Much. (The misreadings, by the way, make my point. Incompetent reading—the reading for example that gives a so-called Coase Theorem which is the opposite of what Coase said; or the reading that turns statistical significance into a way of telling whether a coefficient is large or not—is the trouble with not being smart about one's rhetoric.)

I agree therefore with most of what Mäki says. He says for example that my definitions of rhetoric are "fragmented and scattered." That's correct, though I think justifiably fragmented and scattered, as Mäki agrees. "Rhetoric" is a word like democracy or freedom or capitalism, a complicated matter not easily fitted onto a 3" x 5" card. It is an essentially contested concept, which concerns half of our intellectual culture since the Greeks. Unlike some readers, Mäki has troubled to become acquainted with the other half.

Where we disagree is on analytic philosophy. In a nutshell, Mäki wants to go

on with a project of analytic philosophy c. 1955 that most professionals now think is dead. I by contrast would like to move beyond it, as would many recent philosophers, worldly and otherwise.

Mäki argues that I adopt what the philosophers called in 1955 a coherence theory of truth. Roughly this means that something is true if it hangs together with things we already believe. The philosophers in 1955 contrasted this coherence theory with a "correspondence" theory, which means roughly that something is true if it corresponds to the facts of the world. Having analyzed the definitions of truth into two sorts, the philosophers of 1955 and now Mäki make a strange rhetorical move: "O.K.: choose between them. Go ahead. You must."

But we do not need to choose between them. Contrary to Mäki, correspondence and coherence do not have to be "mutually consistent," any more than pepper and salt have to be mutually consistent. We use both theories in scientific argument daily. In particular, I do, and you do, and Mäki does. Mäki uses correspondence to extract true statements about my writings; and the notions he is able to extract will depend on coherence with what he already believes—for example, about epistemology. I use correspondence for measuring the rate of industri-

alization in Britain; and I use coherence to rule out Harberger triangles as a full explanation.

A "realist" in Mäki's definition is someone who believes (*only*) a correspondence theory of truth. Mäki says I'm not a realist and in his binary world I suppose I'm not. But someone who was not a realist at least part of the time could not cross the street without getting run over. Mäki does not acknowledge that there are people calling themselves realists, such as Rom Harré (1986) and Hilary Putnam (1990) and I myself, who would reject the on-off definition. I don't hold, as Mäki claims, a coherence theory of truth, *alone*. I hold both coherence and correspondence theories (and, while we're at it, 20 other theories: the vocabulary of persuasion is richer than one plus one). I don't see why scientists can't hold both, or 22, and yet remain free from hassling by old-fashioned analytic philosophers for being "inconsistent." I've discussed the question with old-fashioned analytic philosophers (some of my best friends) and they do not seem to have an answer. They sound like Humpty Dumpty. You need to choose. Don't argue. No need to discuss it. *Choose*.

The two choices are in any case small-t notions of truth, such as you might use to get across the street. When talking about the other, Big-T Truth, such as you might use to commune with God, Mäki does not exhibit his usual sophistication. For instance he doesn't understand that my talk about "a heavenly mind," as he puts it, is a figure of speech among philosophers, meant merely to evoke The Transcendental in order to laugh at it. William James ([1907] 1949) put it this way:

What hardens the heart of every one I approach with the view of truth sketched in my last lecture is that typical idol of the tribe, the notion of *the* Truth [p. 239] We

receive in short the block of marble, but we carve the statue ourselves [p. 247]. . . . Other content of truth than this I can find nowhere. If the anti-pragmatists have any other meaning, let them for heaven's sake reveal it, let them grant us access to it! [p. 250]. . . . [They believe in] Reality with the big R, reality that makes the timeless claim, reality to which defeat can't happen [p. 262].

It is therefore not surprising to conclude, as Mäki does after some analytic heavy lifting, that Big-T Truth is not the same thing as small-t and that I don't think much of Big-T. (The reason I don't think much of it, incidentally, is its use for aggression. If I as a Chicago economist believe myself to be in possession of The Truth about competition in the American economy I am led to sneer at you and engage in other nonscientific behavior. It is belief in a god. The theism is what's wrong with some modern sciences, such as ours. On the other hand if I claim for a Chicago-School view of competition in the American economy merely truth, small-t, as I in fact do, then you and I have something about the data to discuss.)

After these philosophical preliminaries, Mäki turns to my sociology of knowledge. He tries to convict me of an anti-democratic delight in an "elite." (I wonder if we are talking about the same social world here. Economists an "elite"?) But I have no interest in empaneling a "jury," or in granting "absolute intellectual authority" to the expert over the citizen. In 1990 I wrote a book subtitled *The Narrative of Economic Expertise* saying so at length. I'm puzzled therefore that Mäki thinks I'm an elitist, and not properly postmodern or democratic or whatever. All I have in mind is that the people speaking in a conversation of science are often worth listening to when a scientific assertion is at issue. I don't see how else we can decide whether a scientific assertion is true. If the anti-pragmatists have any other meaning, let

them for heaven's sake reveal it, let them grant us access to it!

Mäki quite properly emphasizes that my sociology becomes ethics when it turns to normative issues, such as what standard of persuasiveness an economic scientist should use. Again, I don't see how else we can talk about normative issues except by introducing norms. Mäki sneers at the introduction of ethics—an "angel theory of truth," says he. He calls it "optimistic" and "utopian." But isn't that how one talks about norms of scientific behavior, by holding up a utopia for admiration and adopting a certain loony optimism about approaching it? That's what ethical talk is, and ethical talk permeates the scientific world. If you don't think so have a look at the latest controversy over cold fusion or over the elasticity of demand for health care.

In all seriousness, unless we "impose severe moral and social constraints on conversation" how are we going to know if the results from the labs and libraries are to be credited? Like Harré, I believe that in science as in life "seeking truth [that is, Truth] is a hopeless epistemic project, but trying to live a life of virtue is a possible moral ambition The concepts of the moral system appear in the rhetorical glosses on that life. . . . The trust that scientists claim from laypersons entails a commitment to intellectual honesty It cannot possibly be based on a naïve claim to have the truth" (Harré 1986, pp. 89–90). Or the philosopher Nelson Goodman: "The scientist who supposes that he is single-mindedly dedicated to the search for truth deceives himself. He is unconcerned with the trivial truths he could grind out endlessly" (1978, p. 18). The moral constraints in Goodman's view are aesthetic: "He seeks system, simplicity, scope." Or another philosopher, Putnam (1990, p. 115):

In my fantasy of myself as a metaphysical super-hero, all "facts" would dissolve into "values." That there is a chair in this room would be analyzed . . . into a set of obligations: the obligation to think that there is a chair in this room if epistemic conditions are (were) "good" enough What I do think, even outside my fantasies, is that fact and obligation are thoroughly interdependent; there are no facts without obligations, just as there are no obligations without facts.

Correspondence and coherence are too simple a vocabulary to describe scientific persuasion.

Mäki's main philosophical project in his comment is to try to convict me of an inconsistency, or more exactly of begging the question (the classical rhetoricians called it *petitio principii*). Truth in science depends on ethics, says McCloskey and most modern students of the matter (from whom McCloskey stole his argument fair and square). But says Mäki with a tone of discovering something shocking, in a naughty world *where are these ethics?* Says he: McCloskey and the rest are begging the question.

I would reply that the *petitio* is on the other *principium*. Mäki says that for the truth of my argument the economists must be observed acting ethically—"strictly." Oh, oh. His case depends on that word "strictly." (Close reading is one form of rhetorical care.) If it were not for the word "strictly" his charge of inconsistency would not work. McCloskey would merely be saying that we should try to be good, aim at living a life of virtue, which is hardly controversial. But of course I do *not* claim that economists have lived lives of virtue, strictly. No one does, strictly. There is no inconsistency, no begging of the question, in arguing that good science has an ethical base, though never achieved *strictly*. In other words, it is Mäki, not McCloskey, who builds his conclusion into his premise, by inserting that word "strictly." His claim that I have indulged

in a *petitio principii* is erroneous. He himself has indulged in it. Philosopher, analyze thyself.

More broadly, Mäki wants to argue that there is an inconsistency in a rhetorical theory of truth. He is mistaken. A rhetorical theory of truth is a theory of small-t not Big-T truth; only in the Big-T world is it inconsistent to claim Truth for the absence of Truth. Small-t truth is about social agreement, not God's mind. I am urging us to agree not to claim Big-T truth for economic propositions. There's nothing self-contradictory in my plea. As the historian of science Bruno Latour ([1984] 1988, p. 266, n1) put it,

Those who accuse relativists of being self-contradictory can save their breath for a better occasion. I explicitly put my own account in the same category as those accounts I have studied without asking for any privilege. This approach seems self-defeating only to those who believe that the fate of an interpretation is tied to the existence of a safe metalinguistic level [viz., Big-T truth]. Since this belief is precisely what I deny, the reception of my own argument exemplifies my point.

At another level, Mäki finds irritating my suggestion that economics is in pretty good shape. He wants me to offer philosophically acceptable reasons for saying it is. But I am a simple economic historian and cannot offer philosophy to prove such a thing. I offer merely the evidence of my writing and reading on economic history and the teaching of price theory. I think that's where you judge whether economics is in good shape, out in the labs and libraries, not in the philosopher's study.

In short, Mäki wants to go on with the old program of epistemology before 1955, the program of finding Big-T Truth independent of history or society or ethics. I have shown recently in *Knowledge and Persuasion in Economics* (Chs. 14-17) that the professional epistemologists themselves want to aban-

don the old program, though the philosophers of economics have not gotten the news. As the epistemologist Putnam put it, "the enterprises of providing a foundation for Being and Knowledge—a successful description of the Furniture of the World or a successful description of the Canons of Justification—are enterprises that have disastrously failed" (Putnam 1990, p. 19). Or William Rozeboom ([1967] 1993, pp. 183-84):

No harm will be done, I suppose, by retaining a special name for true beliefs at the theoretical limit of absolute conviction and perfect infallibility so long as we appreciate that this ideal is never instantiated, but such sentimentality must not be allowed to impede development of conceptual resources for mastering the panorama of partial certainties which are more literally relevant to the real world.

That's what the real epistemologists think, as contrasted with the epistemologists imagined in controversies over economic method.

But I am emphasizing disagreements with Mäki, which in truth are minor. As I said, Mäki and I agree on a lot. We agree that economics has a rhetorical aspect, that sometimes its rhetoric is good and sometimes not so good. Most of all I think we agree what it's time to put away the philosophical tools, misunderstood and misused by most self-described philosophers of economics, and pick up the historical and sociological and rhetorical ones. There's more that such nonphilosophical tools can tell about what we're saying and how we're saying it. More, anyway, than the philosophers of 1955 shouting at us from their armchairs.

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