

The Cautionary Use of Fakes

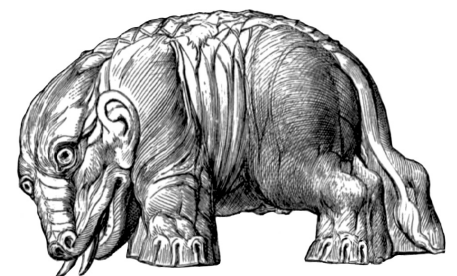
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Abstract

In recent years, academic fakes have routinely been planted in order to discredit academic genres and subdisciplines. In line with Richard Rorty's late pragmatist attempt to identify 'cautionary' and 'metalinguistic' uses of the truth predicate, I suggest we ascribe such fakes a 'cautionary' function, thereby explaining and partly defusing them. The predicate 'is true' highlights both the justification-transcendence of truths as well as their relativity to a specific language or vocabulary. While the cautionary use of 'true' reminds us of possible errors, the cautionary use of fakes reminds us that we may have invested in a problematic vocabulary. Academic fakes point out a lack of critical self-correcting procedures in academic vocabularies, yet at the same time can obstruct their innovative potential at too early a stage. Fakes highlight the fact that academic discourse is not just an industry that produces truths (or falsehoods), but should also be seen as an endeavour to generate new truth value candidates.

Keywords: theories of truth, Rorty, Sokal, Christiane Schulte, fake, hoax

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The academic world is largely united in taking the pursuit of truth to be its *raison d'être*, but torn between two intellectual reactions to the challenge of the 'post-factual'. On the one hand, humanities and social science scholars join natural scientists and engineers in their 'Marches for Science'. In siding with 'facts' against the cranks and ideologues in creationism or climate change denial, they align their understandings of truth claims with the objectivist conception of the natural sciences. On the other hand, this move can prove costly, since it can lead them to dumb down their own disciplines' more sophisticated understandings of truth. Conceptions of truth developed in the humanities and social sciences rarely claim that reality triggers specific human ways of describing and interpreting it. Humanities scholars and social theorists therefore did join the Marches for Science, yet with considerable unease (Hähnlein 2017). Where they insist that their understandings of truth are less straightforward than those of their colleagues in science and engineering, they risk being policed by the more simple-minded defenders of scientific common sense as well as foundationalist philosophers (Vogelmann, this issue). If they point towards the relevance of languages and descriptions in academic progress, or point out that sometimes scientific revolutions upset pictures of facts that have been taken for granted in the search for truth, scientific common sense is prone to labeling such conceptions 'constructivist' and blaming them for the decline of academic resistance to the post-factual.

In this article, I propose humanities and social science scholars turn to late-pragmatist conceptions of language and truth for guidance to avoid the traps laid out from either side, from the side of scientistic objectivism as well as from constructivist relativism. I illustrate the merits of this approach in discussing a disruptive practice that has gained currency in scholarly and scientific circles in the past twenty-five years, the use of the academic fake.^[1] I suggest we apply lessons from Richard Rorty's life-long history of grappling with the truth predicate and ascribe fakes a 'cautionary' function. The 'cautionary' use of the truth predicate Rorty introduced in a 1986 article which tried to make a case for an understanding that is at the same time context-specific and justification-transcendent. In his article, Rorty distinguishes three senses in which the truth predicate might be employed: in its endorsing, cautionary, and metalinguistic ('disquotational') uses. The main examples for the cautionary use occur in statements like 'We all may justifiably think that belief in p is warranted, but p might not be true'. In cases like this, its function is to warn against holding as invariant even 'ideally justified' convictions, since even optimal evidence is open to being challenged by a recalcitrant world, or left behind by better descriptions. New descriptions, however, need not respect the conventions of the former idiom, and Rorty drives this point home in indexing, with Tarski and Davidson, the truth conditions of statements to the languages they have been framed in. Once the cautionary use of truth claims is combined with the metalinguistic insight that truth applies to statements-in-languages, it is no longer plausible to take the world itself to be 'refuting' beliefs, since only beliefs can justify or undermine other beliefs, and beliefs will be framed in one language or other. The cautionary and metalinguistic features of the justification-transcendent truth predicate conspire to pluralise

[1] By an 'academic fake' I mean a disingenuous and meaningless or false publication mimicking the tone and standards of a given discipline. 'Fake' may be the most neutral term available. 'Hoax' and 'sting' overemphasise the tricking of unwitting editors, reviewers, or publishers, which is indeed part of the success conditions of academic fakes, in contrast to the publication of literary or journalistic fakes that often likewise serve purposes of enlightenment and amusement (Ringel 2016).

truth-value candidates. At the same time, they transport a sense of non-arbitrariness that need not be connected to objectivist understandings of truth-claims.

Academic fakes come in many variants, and it is not the purpose of this article to provide a taxonomy. Most prominently, fake academic articles have been used to undermine and discredit the claims to seriousness of fashionable or entrenched academic discourses. Alan Sokal launched his famous 1996 hoax in the journal *Social Text* to shoot down a post-structuralist idiom that had not yet been adopted in the mainstream. Similarly, in 2017, the journal *Cogent Social Sciences* published an update of Sokal's hoax, entitled *The Conceptual Penis as a Social Construct*. The authors argue that the male sexual organ should not be viewed as a given but as "a social construct isomorphic to performative toxic masculinity" (Lindsay/Boyle 2017, 1). In this, they sought to discredit the social constructivist views they believe are dominant in gender studies. In contrast, some academic fakes attack the opposite target: They stand in the service of an epistemic minority and challenge established academic paradigms. In 2015, the journal *Totalitarismus und Demokratie (Totalitarianism and Democracy)* published an article by an authors' collective writing as *Christiane Schulte* who alleged that the bloodline of the German shepherds policing the GDR border went back to the guard dogs of the National Socialist concentration camps. This elegant fake fed on the journal's implicit commitment to an 'extremist' congruence between left- and right-wing totalitarian views and regimes. Unfortunately, the authors, in a clumsy attempt at self-explication, blur their clear-cut agenda, in claiming to have attacked not just a paradigm in political science, but at the same time the rhetoric of animal studies. While cautioning against an established research paradigm—that of extremism research—they claim to be cautioning against a marginal new language of inquiry at the same time.

In the final part of the paper, I draw some conclusions in connecting recent academic fakes with the late-pragmatist understanding of truth, in confronting the truth-orientation of research with the pluralisation of potentially truth-bearing research vocabularies. I interpret academic fakes not as arguments within, but about the aptness of academic vocabularies. My claim is a dual one. Academic fakes point out a lack of critical self-correcting procedures in academic vocabularies, yet at the same time can obstruct their innovative potential at too early a stage. No fake on its own will be capable of discrediting an established academic discourse, whereas they may be able to stifle upstart contenders in their wake. In warning against idioms not beliefs, the cautionary use of fakes needs to be distinguished from the cautionary use of the truth predicate. While the cautionary use of 'true' reminds us of possible errors, the cautionary use of fakes reminds us that we may have invested in a problematic vocabulary. Fakes highlight the fact that academic discourse is not just an industry that produces truths (or falsehoods, as it happens), but should also be seen as an endeavour to generate new truth value candidates.

I.

In his later writings, Richard Rorty switched allegiances from one pragmatist conception of truth to another. Originally, he was concerned with bringing truth within the reach of human practices, but had always found Charles Sanders Peirce's gloss—that truth was waiting for us at the end of human inquiry—unattractive and incoherent (1982, xlv). So, in fully committing to the pragmatist cause in 1982, he threw in his lot with William James' definition of truth as the "good in the way of belief". Over the next years, Rorty's critique of objectivist accounts of truth became more radical, but he conceded that there were decisive disadvantages to James' account. He therefore adopted a three-pronged approach, identifying three characteristic uses of the predicate 'is true': an endorsing use, a cautionary use, and a disquotational use. Rather than defending a single theory of truth, his new conception borrowed from three different traditions: first from the Jamesian tradition which holds that to call something 'true' is to recommend it; second from an anti-epistemic tradition that insists on the justification-transcendent character of truth; and third from an anti-reductionist 20th century tradition in the philosophy of language, where the truth predicate is employed as a primitive for the purpose of interpreting linguistic expressions. I will briefly go into the rejection of Peirce and the interim infatuation with James and then spend more time on the second and third of the uses of the truth predicate, on cautioning and on disquotation, which are more material to our question.

At first glance, Rorty's hostility to Peirce, coming from a pragmatist author, is surprising. For Peirce, truth is whatever we will turn out to believe once all evidence is in.^[2] This process-based conception splits the difference between the natural sciences on the one hand, social sciences and humanities on the other, since it interprets the search for truth not via its elusive object of cognition, but via the search for evidence, the give-and-take of arguments and objections. The view that would survive all objections is the true one. This view connects truth with what is in principle knowable by humans and what is in principle justifiable to humans. The meaning of truth sees to it that whatever is in principle cognition-transcendent or justification-transcendent can be no possible object of it; in other words, truth is conceived of as a fully and transparently 'epistemic' notion, if only under certain idealising constraints. As we will see, Rorty rejects epistemic accounts of truth. But his main criticism of the Peircean conception is not that it connects truth too closely to human purposes and practices. On the contrary, he sees it as still not fully emancipated from objectivist accounts of truth.^[3] Scientific objectivism presses us into assuming that truth lies in sentence-shaped pieces of reality corresponding to the sentences of a single privileged description. Peirce's end-of-inquiry idea plays into the hands of such a conception, since it is still tempted to pair off events and circumstances in the world with the linguistic items that survive all objections, and thereby supports the idea that there exists a unique final description. Rorty argues that the idea "for inquiry to have an end" presupposes that inquiry leads to such a universal convergence of beliefs and descriptions: "Peirce's idea of 'the end of inquiry'

[2] "The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by the truth." (Peirce 1934, [5.407] 268) Apel (1975) is still an authoritative guide.

[3] By an objectivist account, I mean a conception of truth that pairs off linguistic items with isomorphically shaped circumstances and events in the world such that the latter (facts) make the former (statements, beliefs) true. In this definition, I have been influenced by what Rorty has termed *representationalism* about meaning and truth (1991a, 4–12), but hope to capture a wider family of approaches.

might make sense if we could detect an asymptotic convergence in inquiry, but such convergence seems a local and short-term phenomenon.” (Rorty 1991c, 131) He is especially concerned with the observation that “conceptual convergence” is not to be had outside “normal science”, and that it is constantly endangered by the possibility of scientific revolutions (ibid., fn.). He rejects the homogenising, anti-pluralist expectation that the idea of an end to inquiry is saddled with.

In his second book, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, Rorty left Peirce behind and sought out an intuitive polemical allegiance with William James instead. He took on board James’ comparatively vulgar pragmatist understanding of truth as “whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief” (James 1995, 30; Rorty 1982, xxv). James retained the connection introduced by Peirce, in tying the meaning of truth to human practices of inquiry, but not only threw out the idealising conditions that Peirce had relied on, but connected truth with human practical achievement, in a functionalist, broadly utilitarian understanding (which Rorty was then able to give a Nietzschean spin, criticizing our fascination with truth as something to be grown out of (1991b, 32f.)). However, the Jamesian conception had two defects.^[4] It was vulnerable to a formal argument, and it was ill at ease with another philosophical allegiance Rorty was about to strike up, with the post-empiricist conceptions of language and truth introduced by Willard van Orman Quine and especially by Donald Davidson.

In his article called *Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth*, Rorty criticized James for having identified truth with “the expedient in our way of thinking” (Rorty 1991c, 127, quoting James 1995, 86), but concedes that this attempt at a definition of truth fares no better or worse than any other attempt. The formal knockdown argument, which he ascribes to Hilary Putnam, is that no definition of truth by a feature X can make it nonsensical to assert of a belief or statement that “it may be true but not X” (ibid.). This so-called ‘naturalist fallacy’ argument dates back to G. E. Moore, who used it on the term ‘good’, concluding that a reductive definition could not be successful. Similarly, Rorty argues that it always makes sense to wonder, and therefore caution, whether truth and whatever is said to define it may come apart in an individual case. In rejecting James’ account as a complete conception of truth, however, Rorty does not entirely defect from the Jamesian project, retaining what he calls the ‘endorsing’ use of the truth predicate as one of three characteristic features of truth. The predicate ‘true’ can be used by way of paying a compliment to a belief or statement, as well as in recommending it for adoption as belief. Calling something true is expressing a pro-attitude towards that something. In this, Rorty adapts an ‘emotivist’ strategy vis-à-vis the truth predicate, a once popular stance in meta-ethics, according to which the meaning of a certain class of statements lies in their expression of signals of approval and disapproval (Boisvert 2015). This now unfashionable account from the 1950s tried to make sense of moral statements despite their presumed lack of cognitive credentials, i.e. despite the assumption that they did not convey anything that could be true or false. When Rorty adopts the endorsing use of the truth predicate, this is a provocation that his account

[4] I follow Rorty’s paper cut-out version of Jamesian truth here. I cannot go into the recent scholarship from Putnam to Ira Allen (2014) that draws a more nuanced picture.

of the uses of truth is happy to retain, since part of his aim is to subvert and deflate the enormous prestige truth-talk has in our culture. In what follows, we need not commit to joining Rorty in this endeavour, as nothing depends on this feature of his account.

Besides the endorsing use, *Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth* introduced two further and systematically more interesting uses of the truth predicate:

[A] cautionary use, in such remarks as ‘Your belief that S is perfectly justified, but perhaps not true’—reminding ourselves that justification is relative to, and no better than, the beliefs cited as grounds for S, and that such justification is no guarantee that things will go well if we take S as a “rule for action” (Peirce’s definition of belief)

A disquotational use: to say metalinguistic things of the form ‘S’ is true iff ----- (Rorty 1991c, 128)

At first glance, the two features of the truth predicate seem neutral and almost truistic, but they turn out to conspire in a surprisingly productive way. The ‘disquotational’ feature makes sure that we know what the truth predicate is applied to—to linguistic objects of a certain type, objects we understand (sentences, statements, etc.). It uses truth as a primitive notion to account for the meaning of our statements and beliefs. The ‘cautionary’ feature insists that horizontal relations between beliefs constitute all there is in justifying our beliefs and statements, but that they do not exhaust what we mean by truth. In this, the cautionary use refutes ‘epistemic’ accounts of truth of the Peircian and Jamesian type, accounts that deny there is more to truth than (idealised) justification or human achievement. Note that Rorty speaks of the cautionary use of the truth predicate, whereas in fact the cautionary use employed in his example is a feature of the predicate ‘not true’ or, less elliptically, ‘is not true’, not of the predicate ‘true’ (= ‘is true’). This negativistic approach is characteristic for the cautionary use. Indeed, it seems that the truth predicate does not have a cautionary use in its affirmative form. There is no sense in cautioning somebody by specifically warning them that ‘X is true!’ instead of ‘X!’. ‘Beyond this point, there be monsters!’ is no less effective than “‘Beyond this point, there be monsters!’ is true’. It is the cautionary use of the negation of the truth predicate that Rorty’s account highlights. When turning to the cautionary uses of fakes in section II., we will see that they share this negativistic strategy.

Before we move on, note that the cautionary use of ‘true’ is at cross-purposes with the endorsing use. While the endorsing use assumes that the truth predicate serves no cognitive purpose, but rather channels preferences for beliefs which may or may not be capable of justification or corroboration, the cautionary use admits that truth may lie beyond even the most sustained and successful attempts at justification. What holds both uses together is that James-type definitions à la ‘the truth is what’s good in the way of belief’ and Peirce-type definitions à la ‘the truth is what would be consented at the end of inquiry’ both fall victim to Putnam’s formula. Something may be good in the way of belief, but not true. Something may be perfectly justified, but

perhaps not true. But while the endorsing use lowers the bar for the successful employment of ‘true’, the cautionary use raises the stakes in denying that there is any stable connection between truth and our most sustained epistemic endeavours. The cautionary use denies what Peirce asserted, namely that truth is an idealised epistemic predicate: that there is a necessary and (in its idealised form) sufficient connection between justification and truth. Rorty breaks with the broadly epistemic accounts that his pragmatist predecessors had tried to get right.

The disquotational sense of the truth predicate may at first seem like a technicality. In both Quine and Davidson, the truth predicate serves as a device in explaining how we understand statements in natural languages. The phrase ‘is true’ dismantles quotation marks when the meaning of a quoted expression is at issue. “‘Snow is white’ is true if and only if snow is white”—sentences like this show how the truth predicate enables us to open the black box of a given quoted utterance, and to specify its meaning. This works for expressions of the same and of different languages, since ‘*Schnee ist weiß*’ is true if and only if snow is white. These so-called T-sentences (T for Truth) can be used by competent speakers to translate content into their own languages (sometimes trivial and mechanical, as in the case of the homonymous translation from ‘snow is white’ to snow is white, sometimes informative as in the case of the translation from German to English). Since the phrase ‘is true if and only if’ is used to explain meaning and not vice versa, Quine’s and Davidson’s approach presupposes an intuitive grasp of the truth predicate. If truth is already well-understood, conflicts about which conception of truth is the most satisfactory one seem unnecessary.

A second feature of disquotation proved crucial for Rorty’s adaptation. The German language example shows that the truth-predicate needs to be indexed to a language in order to be successfully dis-quoted. ‘*Schnee ist weiß*’ is true in German if and only if snow is white. Whenever the truth predicate is applied to linguistic expressions, it must always be weighed down with a contextualising index indicating the language L concerned: ‘true-in-L’. There is no ‘true as such’ in a disquotational approach, there is just truth-in-various-L. The introduction of T-in-L sentences goes back to the Polish logician Alfred Tarski and proved a major influence on the analytical revolution of the mid-20th century. Tarski insisted that successfully applying the concept of truth to linguistic expressions is dependent on the “particular language under consideration. The same expression can, in one language, be a true sentence, in another a false one or a meaningless expression” (Tarski 1935, quoted in Künne 2003, 181). Tarski’s insight was originally developed for formal languages, but soon generalised to natural languages by authors such as Quine and Davidson. It can be illustrated with examples such as the following:

A billion is a thousand millions.

A statement of this sentence is true in American English (AE) but false in British English (BE) and meaningless in Polish (see Künne 2003, 181).^[5] In BE, a billion is a million millions, such that ‘A billion is a thousand millions’

^[5] In fact, it appears that the statement is no longer false in BE. At any rate, it used to be false at least well into the 1970s, when a major linguistic shift took place.

is false. ‘Billion’ in BE means what ‘trillion’ means in AE. Using the truth-predicate as a disquotational device, a speaker of American English could assert “A billion is a million millions’ is true-in-BE if and only if a trillion is a million millions’, i.e. if ‘billion’ in AE means what ‘trillion’ means in BE. Of course, unlike formal languages, natural languages are not immune to ambiguities, or to shifts in meaning over time, and they contain dialects that make stable individuations of one-and-the-same language difficult. What is more, linguistic normativity in natural languages is not prescriptive in the sense that speakers are tied to standard usage. Outside legally relevant contexts, speakers are free to use expressions as they please. Attentive listeners, let alone interpreters and professional translators, are rarely at a loss when sorting out personal idiosyncrasies in usage. These observations led Donald Davidson to the conclusion that not only was Tarski’s formal and confined understanding of what would qualify as a consistent L in ‘true-in-L’ to be rejected. Faced with the innumerable variations, divergences and deficiencies of speakers of natural languages, he proposed leaving the collective semantics of codified bodies such as ‘American English’ or ‘British English’ behind and focusing on idiolects instead (Davidson 2005). The L in ‘true-in-L’ would then have to be particularised to singular linguistic performances of individual speakers at specific points in time (and open to changes in the same speaker’s later uses of the same terms). Tarski’s disquotational idea, having started out as the controlled application of the truth predicate to stipulatively defined artificial languages, had first migrated to provide guidance for theories of meaning for natural languages, only to lead to the fragmentation of the truth predicate into myriads of languages L, languages for which the expression ‘true-in-L’ only marked out a momentous and individualistic reference.

Rorty’s 1986 insight was that using ‘true-in-L’ as an undefined primitive could be instrumental in introducing a pluralistic turn into contemporary theories of truth, since truth could never be unbound from the L it was tied to, without thereby falling foul of the justification-transcendent implications of the ‘cautionary use’. Whenever the truth predicate is applied to linguistic objects, it needs to reflect the variation in descriptive languages, a variation that may or may not be open to convergence of the ‘billion’-trillion type, resolvable or irresolvable by stable word-for-word translation. Cautionary uses reflect the justification-transcendence of truth, while disquotational uses stand for the fragmentation and particularisation of the truth predicate to individual languages, and, with Davidson, to individual speakers and even individual occasions of utterances. Once we see the cautionary and disquotational uses as reacting to a spent Peircean paradigm, they underline two closely connected points. Justification-transcendence rules out that human convergence in beliefs and descriptions will exhaust our sense of truth, while the proliferation of languages, producing potential vehicles for the truth predicate, attests to that same divergence. Truth cannot be reduced to justification, but since languages cannot be reduced to language, there is no such thing as a single big truth lurking beyond all possible justifications. Instead, there is a standing cautionary admonition behind any justificatory repertoire, for innumerable repertoires.

II.

Perhaps the most celebrated of academic fakes is the physicist Alan D. Sokal's *Transgressing the Boundaries. Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity*.^[6] Its publication in the cultural studies journal *Social Text* in April 1996 was greeted as a major academic scandal. Sokal had made use of a battery of poststructuralist terminology to suggest that the concept of relativity employed in quantum physics could be understood to have politically liberating effects. Although departing from a sound grasp of the state of the art in physics, the article abounded with non-sequiturs and absurdities. Publicly, the Sokal hoax was quickly coopted to mark out a position in the Science Wars of the late 1990s, reflecting a deep split in the academic system and in the scholarly community as a whole. While the article had a lasting impact on the reputation of poststructuralist discourse outside of its core disciplines, its aim, at least in Sokal's retrospective self-interpretation (2008, xiv), was more narrow. Its immediate goal, Sokal later said, was to attack the journal's attempted debunking of scientific objectivity as multiply prejudiced and prey to ideological purposes, and its propagation of interdisciplinarity, which in Sokal's eyes sabotaged the integrity of scientific disciplines. However, a broader interpretation took hold according to which even within cultural studies, their adopted *lingua franca* did not make much sense. "The overwhelming take on the affair by the media was that Sokal had exposed the pretentiousness and sloppy scholarship of 'the academic left'." (Howard 2012, 281) Immediately after the successful hoax in *Social Text*, Sokal himself and his co-author Jean Bricmont had launched a broader critique of post-modernist cultural studies as nonsense upon stilts in their volume *Impostures Intellectuels*, which exemplified not the narrower narrative of a defense of hard science against its detractors, but subscribed to the traditional diagnosis of intellectuals' moral and political irresponsibility (Sokal/Bricmont 1999). Still, it is remarkable that among the critical reactions to Sokal's hoax and the subsequent book, defensiveness reigned. Attributions and quotations were contested, yet no direct refutation attempted (see e.g. Derrida 2005, 70ff.). Even where the *ressentiment* expressed in the Sokal hoax was derided, the integrity of the separate scholarly practises in science and the humanities was defended (Rorty 1999). One lesson to be learned, therefore, by those on the receiving end of Sokal's hoax, is that organised redescriptions of scientific endeavours have to respect some success conditions. If they cannot be made hoax-proof, in other words, if they cannot be immunised against self-parody, they will not succeed in de-mystifying science in the broader culture. With regard to the narrow interpretation, it seems clear that if you can't rule out to be fooled by an academic fake, you do not command the rules of your own vocabulary to a sufficient extent to be offering it as a replacement for existing descriptions. This does not entail, however, that the vocabulary cannot serve other purposes.

In 2017, Jamie Lindsay and Peter Boyle (the latter a pseudonym for Peter Boghossian) published an article in the Journal *Cogent Social Science* entitled *The Conceptual Penis as a Social Construct*. Their stunt was often compared to Sokal's fake, and hailed as its contemporary successor. In line with Sokal,

[6] For a much annotated version with multiple afterwords, see Sokal 2008.

and in contrast to the more recent phenomenon of the mechanical fake, where authors have algorithms spout prose and trick conferences and journals into accepting even syntactically non-well-formed papers,[7] the authors of *The Conceptual Penis* respected genre conventions. They argue that a penis is best understood not as a male bodily organ but rather as “a social construct isomorphic to performative toxic masculinity”, claiming that their study opens “an avenue to a new frontier in gender and masculinities research that can transform our cultural geographies, mitigate climate change, and achieve social justice” (Lindsay/Boyle 2017, 1). The authors try to expose what they believe is a social scientific paradigm bordering on nonsense, identifying the critical target of their paper as that of “the style of post-structuralist discursive gender theory” (Boghossian/Lindsay n.d.). In contrast to Sokal’s, Lindsay and Boyle’s sting does not admit of a narrow interpretation. The authors attack the hermetic vocabulary of gender studies itself, not its attempts to stray across disciplinary borders, or into the hard sciences. In the aftermath of the hoax, commentators pointed out that the open access journal *Cogent Social Science* was not the authors’ first choice, but that they had submitted their contribution to *NORMA: International Journal for Masculinity Studies*. The gender studies experts at the latter journal had rejected the article, but for inscrutable reasons had recommended it for publication in *Cogent Social Science*. *Cogent Social Science* is to some extent a vanity publication since authors are asked to pay to have their contributions published, which is not the case for most serious journals. Some commentators argue that thereby, the joke exploded in the authors’ faces, more concretely that it exposed them as resentment-fuelled males rejecting the comparative academic success of gender studies, yet still being rejected in disciplinary peer review. Others accepted their fake as a valid criticism of the structural problems in controlling what passes into open access publications. The interpretation of Lindsay and Boyle’s ‘sting’ operation thus centered less on the field of gender studies and more on contemporary standards in the publishing industry, with special regard to publications that churn out large numbers of contributions, with little quality control and added economic incentives. This was not the case for Sokal, who did receive suggestions from editorial review, but whose paper, unlike Lindsay and Boyle’s, was not subjected to peer review (Howard 2012, 282). Whereas Sokal landed his hoax in the centre of post-structuralist academic discussion, Lindsay and Boyle showed that the periphery of social scientific discourse is not sufficiently alert to be hoax-proof.

Christiane Schulte was introduced to her readers with the photograph of a smart, pensive brunette.[8] According to the authors’ later disclosure, the photo was sourced via Google Pictures, with a bland search term such as ‘beautiful female face’, settling on one of the very first results that came up. *Christiane* was allegedly born in 1989, the year the Berlin wall came down, and in the process of writing a dissertation on the topic of *The German-German Shepherd – A Comparative History of Violence in the 20th Century*. Her affiliation was given as Kassel University’s history department, a well-known stronghold of Human-Animal Studies. The article set out to prove that an unbroken continuity of terror from National Socialism to Real Existing

[7] For an initial orientation, see the Wikipedia *List of scholarly publishing stings*: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_scholarly_publishing_stings (13/11/2018).

[8] DIE ZEIT insisted she was blond (Machowecz 2016) which indicates that even the power to confuse is culturally colour-coded.

Socialism ran through the veins of generations of their guard dogs. Files in the (non-existent) *Rasse- und Zuchtarchiv Umpferstedt* proved the direct bloodline lineage from Concentration Camp guard dogs to the unfortunate *Mauerhunde* who were chain-linked to border fortifications. This lets *Christiane* conclude that

Beide totalitären Diktaturen des 20. Jahrhunderts verband also eine Gewalttradition; in einem fast schon dynastischen Verhältnis wurden mehrere Generationen von Schäferhunden als Instrumente totalitären Terrors eingesetzt.

[Hence both totalitarian dictatorships of the 20th century were linked by a tradition of violence: in an almost dynastical relation, several generations of guard dogs were employed as instruments of totalitarian terror.] (Anonyma 2015, 324)

It is obvious that connecting the two 20th century regimes of injustice via the DNA of their instruments of terror is intended to rehabilitate both the default ambidextrous ‘anti-extremist’ strategy that thrived in West Germany after WWII, where right- and left-wing ‘extremism’ were viewed as equally salient challenges to the republic (Niesen 2004), as well as the ‘Two Totalitarianisms’-interpretation in which excesses of the authoritarian regime of the GDR, during and after its Stalinist beginnings, were set morally on a par with the genocidal crimes of National Socialism (Žižek 2005). The continuity in the history of its guard dogs would count against the ‘singular’ character of the Holocaust that had been fought over since the famous historians’ debate (*Historikerstreit*) in the late 1980s. The *Yearbook for Extremism and Democracy*, the predecessor journal, had built its reputation in equating left- and right-wing extremism, National Socialism and Communism as ‘equidistant’ from liberal constitutionalism, and the journal re-fashioned as *Totalitarismus und Demokratie* was now keen to reproduce this. The fact that the editor of the non-peer reviewed journal had fallen victim to an academic fake proved the self-corroborating tendencies of a research paradigm that had survived the Cold War, but had not paused to reflect its basic assumptions. If by ‘ideology’ (a term with many uses) we mean a view that necessarily self-confirms from a given, interested perspective, the *Schulte* fake had proved the ideological character of the research assumptions behind *Totalitarianism and Democracy*.

In an interesting twist, however, the *Schulte* collective argued that their hoax served a dual aim. In an *ex post facto* declaration, they insisted that on the one hand, it had aimed to show that “extremism theory is not a scientific method”. On the other hand, the authors said they had wanted to start a full-blown debate over the question “why engaged social criticism has become the exception in the humanities” (Anonyma 2016). The authors’ declaration exposed a political agenda that overlapped to a great extent with the worldview kept alive by *Totalitarismus und Demokratie*:

Mit dem Zusammenbruch des Staatssozialismus und dem Utopieverlust der politischen Linken wurden Subjekte wie ‚die Arbeiterklasse‘ oder ‚wir Frauen‘ jedoch zunehmend fragwürdig. Stattdessen bekamen nun die lieben Tiere ihre

Agency zugesprochen. Die entstehende Tierrechtsbewegung übertrug das Vokabular von Ausbeutung und Entrechtung auf Tiere, fügte der Triade von ‚class, race, gender‘ ein neues Herrschaftsverhältnis hinzu und kritisierte alle, die zwischen der Ausbeutung von Milchkühen und Sklaven noch Unterschiede erkennen wollten.

[With the collapse of state socialism and the loss of utopias on the political Left, subjects such as ‘the working class’ or ‘we women’ became increasingly dubious. Instead, agency was ascribed to the dear animals. The emerging animal rights movement transferred the vocabulary of exploitation and the loss of rights to animals, added a new form of domination to the triad of ‘class, race, gender’ and criticised those who kept on distinguishing between the exploitation of dairy cows and that of slaves.] (Anonyma 2016)

The authors do not explain why it should seem impossible to criticise both slavery and industrial agriculture, and why the latter agenda is obviously inferior from the point of view of the political Left. They made no effort to explain why ascribing agency to animals is incompatible with ‘engaged social criticism’ and not one of its contemporary forms. For our purposes, it is decisive that they did not manage to place their article in an animal studies journal, or displayed familiarity with the standards, terminology or state of the art of that genre. In a similar move to Sokal’s strategy, who placed a ludicrous view of physics in a cultural studies journal, not a physics journal, *Christiane* claims to have fooled Animal Studies for which *Totalitarismus und Demokratie* has no track record. On the contrary, their article’s surface sensitivity to human-animal relations has arguably contributed to its acceptance (see Machowecz 2016), in a misguided attempt at modernisation of a struggling academic and political paradigm. Nobody with expertise in human-animal-relations had fallen for the charm of the splendidly invented evidence offered in the piece, and nobody in animal studies could possibly have been exposed by the fake’s success. An eye-opener with regard to the partiality of the vocabulary of ‘extremism research’, the *Schulte* fake failed in regard to its avowed second aim. But of course we should allow that some fakers may be confused as to their target.

III.

In this concluding section, I want to connect the lessons from our discussion of the truth predicate in section I. with the analysis of the meaning and function of academic fakes in section II.

The cautionary use of ‘true’ served to express skepticism toward justification as a final *arbiter*. While justification is immanent to a given set of statements and beliefs and to given ways of expressing them, truth transcends actual and potential justification. The fact that truth transcends all justification does not only entail that we might be wrong in what we believe to be true-in-L, but it may also encourage us to come up with alternative L. The disquotational use of the truth predicate reminds us of the fact that we need to index truth

conditions to the language used in quoted statements, and that we must not be too confident about homonymous translatability. On the contrary, the confrontation with strange ways of speaking in unfamiliar academic genres underlined the fragmentation of truth claims to the languages employed. The late-pragmatist take on the truth predicate, combining its cautionary and its disquotational uses, is itself neither objectivist, nor does it have relativist implications. It does not deny that truth is independent of whether we grasp it, nor that what is true remains so. It can firmly commit to facts (truths under a description) but insist that the world does not get to pick those descriptions. The combination of cautionary and disquotational uses thus recommends seeking out new languages in order to complement or supersede the existing carriers of meaning and justification. Of course, the disquotational particularisation of truth claims to languages does not entail that vocabularies themselves can vouch for the truth of their statements, on the contrary. They can add justification upon justification, yet may never be complacent about their own claims, since they will not connect with a true-making world that then privileges their type of description over others.

One function of academic fakes is therefore to expose the limited immanent efficacy of concrete genres of justification in given languages *L*. In contrast to the cautionary use of the truth predicate, which may or may not be redeemed by a move within a given vocabulary, a successful academic fake must not be understood as a tool of falsification of particular truth claims, but as a critique of a given vocabulary itself. In some instances, for example in *Christiane Schulte's* highlighting the biased nature of extremism research, it applies a form of immanent critique in bringing to light assumptions that seem necessarily self-reinforcing from a particular epistemic perspective (Stahl 2013). In contrast to more traditional forms of immanent critique, fakes do not expose contradictions, but ridicule through a strategy of subversive over-affirmation. Although fakes do not venture explanations for why certain vocabularies tend to self-enforce (beyond imputations of prejudice or the political instrumentalisation of scholarship which are shown but not stated in the fakes themselves), they expose the un-guarded reproduction of assumptions through an irreverent exploitation of a vocabulary's conventions. Fakes operate in an immanent way in that they do not bring to bear alternative 'correct' norms and ways of speaking, although those will of course motivate and inform the work of the fakers. But although fakes pretend to be moves, or rather collections of moves, within a given register, it seems more apt to see them cautioning against employing the register itself, since its protagonists fail to see that its statements and beliefs are prone to self-confirmation, not just tone-deaf to its humorous abuses. But like the cautionary use of the truth predicate, a cautionary use of fakes is not an argument. Fakes push and shove, but do not refute.

With regard to Sokal's original hoax, recall that we distinguished between a narrow and a wide use of fakes. The narrow use is defensive. It reminds innovators not to stray beyond their area of competence. They can hardly hope to redescribe the domain of a formerly dominant academic discourse, such as physics, if they do not sufficiently command its rules in order not to

be fooled by its practitioners. While the narrow use is anti-hegemonic, so to speak, the wide use is itself based on a desire for hegemony, in attempting to destroy vocabularies that fail to comply with its standards. More often than not, it is the fakes themselves that stand in the service of corroborating dominant discourses. The self-image of the faker is that of an embattled fighter in struggles for academic hegemony (Boghossian/Lindsay n.d.; Sokal 2008; Anonyma 2016). This can lead them to attack easy targets, for example in the Boyle/Lindsay triumph of fooling a bottom-of-the-foodchain journal, or to claim victory over an opponent whom they have not in fact tricked (as in Boyle and Lindsay's rejection by a *bona fide* gender studies journal, and in *Christiane Schulte*'s false claim to have exposed animal studies' assumptions, which they have not in fact tested). The recent proud unveiling of an industrial scale production of fakes by Boghossian, Lindsay and their co-author Helen Pluckrose has still widened the gap between what the authors take themselves to have established, and the rivalling, more impassive explanations.^[9] While the cautionary use of the truth predicate reminds us that we may need new descriptive languages, the cautionary use of fakes to test these languages can take on a reactionary function when attempting to shoot down new upstart vocabularies. I take *Christiane Schulte* at their word in illustrating this propensity with one of the alleged targets of their fake, the incriminated language of animal studies.

Recent work by Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka (2011) gives a political reading of human-animal relations. It invites us to see domesticated animals as co-citizens, i.e. as members of our polities who display political preferences and deserve political representation. Its language of political inclusion (replacing, e.g. languages of ethical compassion or the 'animal liberation' approach that *Schulte* allude to) makes a new start where other allusive descriptions seem spent. Donaldson and Kymlicka's suggestion has met with some predictable knee-jerk reactions (Electoral rights for sheep?), and we cannot know what fakes are already being prepared to put the boot into the rhetoric of animal citizenship. In our contemporary political language, 'domesticated animals are co-citizens' is as absurd as it is in Polish. But the wager is that it might be productive to spell out the conditions under which a statement such as 'domesticated animals are political co-citizens' could be true-in-L, where L is the default human-animal relations vocabulary in affluent societies. Treating 'domesticated animals are political co-citizens' as a truth value candidate of course does not make it true, but it may lead to a debate over the suitability of the citizenship metaphor, the conditions under which it is plausible to ascribe animals citizenship, and, eventually, over the suitability of keeping alive such (at first) counterintuitive ways of talking. A literalisation of the citizenship metaphor would depend not only on the specification of what animal citizenship would mean-in-our-L, by settling on necessary and sufficient conditions, but also on successful social and political struggles. It would need to catch on as a way of describing important commonalities between domesticated animals and humans, and be propped up by good normative reasons (internal justifications) as to why this should be the case (co-dependency, cooperation, coexistence, etc.). The risk of failure, and not

^[9] For a first roundup of interpretations, see Kafka 2018. There is a new dimension to the most recent barrage of hoaxes in that the invention of data and the fabrication of empirical studies on the part of the authors seem to have been key in securing publication. This element seems to push the analysis of fakes toward the analysis of academic imposters and frauds, which cannot be pursued in this paper.

just of internal implausibility, must necessarily accompany the launch of such a vocabulary, as well as the permanent shadow of academic fakes. A successful fake of the animal citizenship paradigm would have to show that its cards are stacked against counter-evidence. Absent such a showing, it could demonstrate no more than that an uncharitable homonymous translation can lead to a *reductio ad absurdum* of intra-vocabulary claims. It cannot show that framing human-animal relations under the co-citizenship description does not have an edge over some other languages of human-animal relations, as a whole or in some aspects. Such a vocabulary may enable formulations that qualify as facts, and therefore truths, that are not yet accessible from the perspective of existing vocabularies.

To wrap up, the existence of academic fakes shows that not all scholarly debate is concerned with the question of which statements in a given vocabulary are true, but also with improving or changing vocabularies that generate new candidates for truth and falsity. It is those candidates, and the systematic conceptual connections they provide, that fakes aim to sabotage. In applying cautionary practises to standard and non-standard repertoires, fakes combine the cautionary and metalinguistic lessons of Rorty's late pragmatist conception of truth. They caution not against errors in but the error of such repertoires. In only apparently conducting their single-minded pursuit of truth within a given academic vocabulary, they warn against the use of unproductive old and unprincipled new vocabularies. Fakes play a dual role, in revealing the lack of self-correction mechanisms in the employment of standard and new vocabularies, and in attempting to foreclose on new fledgling vocabularies. Sometimes fakes just confirm that a given vocabulary is counterintuitive and can be parroted, which is not informative in itself. Of course, being liable to be parodied (and failing to notice) makes practitioners look bad, as in all three fakes discussed, and initial skepticism applies to practitioners who can't tell when their vocabulary is the butt of a joke. But the lack of a working sense of humour that would allow to detect a fake indicates no epistemological failure, but only a failure of worldliness. Where fakes do more than cause gratuitous amusement they also sow a suspicion that, as in the case of the *Schulte* fake, research paradigms are prone to confirming their own expectations. Such cautioning can be used to uncover self-corroborating tendencies in established discourses, and suggest that they be left behind, as in the case of extremism research. At the same time, fakes can channel the tyranny of scientific common sense and the impatience of accepted methodology vis-a-vis experimental new vocabularies, intending to shut them down before they have had a chance to prove their worth. This seems to be the case when *Christiane*, in a misguided self-interpretation, complain that animal studies are taking up the attention formerly reserved for women and the working class. To conclude, it is impossible, but also undesirable, not to risk falling for fakes, and the continuous danger of being fooled may have a hand in keeping thinkers more honest than they would otherwise be disposed to. But falling foul of a fake is a risk worth taking, since academic progress may lie with the linguistic innovators.^[10]

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[11] Note: The article has been withdrawn from the journal’s online resource, but can be accessed in hard copy. A pdf-copy is on file with the author.

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