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Reality Re-Checked and Galileo Re-Integrated: A Reply to Jones and Spurrett

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Introduction

This paper intends to address some of the points raised in the two commentaries by Peter E. Jones (Jones 2013) and David Spurrett (Spurrett 2013). I am grateful for their contributions, both challenging and constructive. I take this opportunity to add some reflections of mine to Jones' remarks concerning realism and reality, and to defend Roy Harris' claim that Galileo and the Church 'shared the same old reocentric model of semantics' (Harris 2005, 131), which Spurrett decisively rejects (Spurrett 2009; 2013). The latter enterprise calls for a more detailed analysis of 'surrogationalism' (Harris 1996, 124-142) and how it relates to science as a 'supercategory' and the language of science (Harris 2005). I will not elaborate any further on Rorty's constructivist philosophy at this point – suffice it to say that Harris and Rorty have very similar ideas on the subject of 'surrogationalism', as briefly discussed in the article that prompted the two commentaries. The reflections that follow here have an integrational epistemological underpinning.

Realism: A Match for Reality?

Peter Jones (2013, 18) remarks, concerning the 'Barbara case', that perhaps one lesson to be learnt from it is that

> we have ways of adjusting, of revising, our sign-making activities to enable better 'matches' (albeit always provisional) between what we think about things and the way things are (Jones 2013, 18).

But Jones admits that my sister's sign-making activities 'when she thought there were two Barbara's were just as real as when she realized there was only one.' He also points out that different people live in different 'realities' and that there needn't be any points of contact – until the contingencies of life connects them. This *shared* reality would then be a 'better' match. Jones is right to point out that 'the very possibility of sign-making activities' of the here-and-now, by being linked with the past (that we can only remember) and the future (that we can only anticipate), allows for a semiological flexibility indispensable to the survival of the individual and that of the human race. That includes the 'revisings' mentioned by Jones, and also how we tend to talk about our sign-making activities *retrospectively* (which, in turn, influences how we come to conceive of these activities). Thus, my sister would probably say of herself that she 'wrongly assumed' that there were two Barbaras; or that she was 'mistaken' about Barbara's two identities. But while integrationism (and integrational linguistics) is fundamentally lay-oriented, it also pinpoints on where ordinary language use might lead us astray when it comes to a proper understanding of the field of human knowledge.

Even though my sister realized at one point that the two Barbaras were 'one and the same' person, there remains the fact that the question of being 'the same person' is, like everything else, context-dependent. What we *mean* by that word depends on the

circumstances in which we say it and cannot be checked against 'objective' criteria. (We are all familiar with a statement such as: 'You're not 'the John' I fell in love with when we first met!'. Does the person uttering this 'really' believe that her husband is *another John* now? Does such a question make sense at all?). Hardliners in the realist camp might rebut at this point that there was *only one Barbara* to begin with: it is a biological fact, and any sceptic could ask Barbara herself for confirmation (after all, she will know whether it was her on the various occasions that she met my sister). But to rely on biological facts to settle the question is precisely to adopt a *segregational* point of view. The question of a person's identity has many facets: when my sister realized that the identities of the two Barbaras actually 'matched', it is not clear on what basis she did so; retrospectively, one is tempted to say that it must have been on the basis of biological considerations. However, there may be contexts in which my sister would defend her previous 'reality', arguing that Barbara really was like two different persons on the various occasions she had met her (for whatever reasons). For the integrationist, 'sameness' is always sameness from the point of view of somebody; it is biomechanically, circumstantially and macrosocially determined.

A 'Realist' Position?

Peter Jones (2013, 16) suggests that the integrational position on reality may, after all, be a 'realist' position. On that score, it is worth citing what Roy Harris recently remarked, namely that 'integrationism can be interpreted as a form of relativism, inasmuch as what is integrated is always relative to individuals in particular communication situations' (Harris 2013, 31). I don't see this statement as necessarily opposed to viewing integrationism as a form of 'realism', provided that such a stance does not commit one to accepting that there is an observer-independent reality. The notion of an 'objective' reality is the product of the human ability to consider the constitution of objects in the human *Umwelt* in relation to the objects themselves, i.e. to contemplate them 'for their own sake' (Deely 2009, 11). Animals don't possess this ability, being able to consider the objects of their *Umwelt* only in relation to (the animals) themselves.

Jones (2013, 16) further notes that Harris himself recognizes the existence of an 'external world'. Undoubtedly so: it is a world that individuals recognize as a world they are living in. A world that is not a figment of their imagination; the same world as other people inhabit, while at the same time perceptually different for each of us. We tend to suppress the differences of first-order experience, seeking reassurance in the common vocabulary we share to refer to this one world and its objects. We use labels that have acquired a customary ring in our lives, having been exposed to them since childhood. In fact, these shared labels come to be regarded as contextless: they function as mere descriptors of a (pre-linguistic) world already given antecedently. And thus language is seen as playing merely an additional role, namely that of enabling us to talk about the external – already given – world with others. The Aristotelian creed that reality is the same for all observers crucially depends on construing words as verbal surrogates shared by all speakers of 'a language'.

From an integrational point of view, objects 'exist' in relation to a person for whom they function as signs in particular circumstances, i.e. who integrates them as part of a

programme of activities. In ordinary life situations, we hardly ever raise questions of the sort 'What is reality?' or 'Is there an objective reality?' The computer I'm writing on right now, the chair I'm sitting on right now, my kids' voices I can hear upstairs right now, etc. are part of (contained in) this so-called 'external world', *which we mostly take for granted*.

Peripheral Semantic Issues for 'Grand Questions'?

Galileo, *qua* professional astronomer, was not concerned with everyday reality as confirmed by his senses in the immediate here-and-now. The object of study of astronomy belonged to the realm of extra-anthropic Nature; the solar system was 'anthropically quantifiable' (and therefore suitable to be discussed in anthropic language) and amenable to 'terrestrial mathematics' (Harris 2005, 180). However, engaging in astronomical research also meant encroaching on a domain over which theology claimed authority. It seems to me that scrutinizing the heavens with a telescope at that time was an entirely different matter from 'put[ting] different things in water and watch[ing] what happens' (Jones 2013, 17), i.e. observing whether they sink or stay afloat — precisely because of the (potentially) explosive nature of the discourse in which the former activity was embedded.

Galileo's disagreement with how Catholic doctrine explained the cosmos had, ultimately, to do with the 'grand question' whether the earth was really the center of the universe.[1] The question was not debated with a specific pragmatic purpose in mind: this was not 'applied science' trying to establish whether the earth moved around the sun, or the sun around the earth, because, say, the outcome was to have an impact on how to develop the right kinds of spaceship that would be able to send out mankind on a quest for other water-bearing planets in the universe. One version of the 'grand question' could be formulated as a purely factual question (e.g. 'What does it mean to move?').[2] In fact, Spurrett (2009, 100) regards the dispute between Galileo and the Church as one 'over a factual question'. Harris, on the other hand, tells a different story (2005, 130-132). Elsewhere, he (Harris 2011) reminds us that so-called 'ultimate questions' always presuppose real people asking and answering them, which introduces a communicational dimension that cannot go ignored.

In Harris' story, both Galileo and the theologians of the Holy Office embraced a reocentric theory of meaning. Spurrett (2013, 25) thinks that's wrong, and argues that

> both of Galileo's confrontations with the Inquisition took place in an atmosphere of subtle and self-conscious debate over different types of demonstration, and different principles of scriptural exegesis, and

[1] These 'grand questions' are more like 'grand challenges', as they challenge widely accepted truths. Charles Darwin asked another such 'grand question' concerning our place in Nature, which challenged the received notion of Man as fundamentally different from Beast.

[2] Of course, everyone involved in the dispute was fully aware that much more was at stake than just establishing an astronomical truth. The whole debate was deeply ideological, political, cultural, etc. from the onset. Nevertheless, those involved in the conflict believed that the answer to the *factual question itself* was essentially not dependent on contingent factors.

> everyone actively involved […] was fully aware of this.

I agree with Spurrett that everyone involved in the various confrontations certainly experienced language as 'embodied' (if that is the point he wants to make). It might seem, therefore, that if they shared a semantic theory at all, it was more likely to be an integrational one. However, we must not conflate first-order communicational experience and second-order sign theory. The 'integrational' nature of signs belongs to the former: *words are never sponsorless, and meaning never contextless*. But this doesn't make Galileo, Bellarmine & Co. integrational theorists *avant la lettre*. On the contrary. Their academic professions and institutionalized traditions called for the adoption of a segregational sign theory. On the battlefield of theology versus astronomy, the victorious sign was to be an impersonal one: in fact, only the reocentric surrogational sign sponsored a theory of reference that acknowledges the isomorphic relation between signs and the objects of pre-linguistic Nature (or human history), to the effect that the meaning of the sign is the object (or person, place, event) itself. As Harris (2009b, 48) tells us:

> A theory of reference, insofar as it concerns language, is an attempt to answer general questions like: 'How is it possible for us to make clear to others that we are talking (or writing) about one particular thing, or class of things, and not something else? […] The common sense answer would seem to be that, leaving aside nonverbal mechanisms (such as pointing), we can indicate what it is we are talking about because our language supplies us with the words and expressions necessary to do this. Persons and places have names (*Napoleon, London, Mount Everest*), events can be identified by description (*the funeral of Queen Victoria*), times can be specified (*on the 1st of January 2001*), and so on.

The surrogational model was the oldest model of signification in the Western tradition (Harris 1996, 124). What theory of reference did Galileo, Bellarmine & Co. adhere to if not a surrogational one?

Spurrett (2013, 24) thinks that Harris 'fails to appreciate the reason for a 'genuine' conflict', which is disagreement. He goes on to say (2013, 25) that some disagreements are about 'what things this or that term refers to'; and some disagreements about what a term refers to are — he concedes — also 'disagreements over meaning': Galileo and Bellarmine differed over 'what things the verb 'to move' applied to'. Conflicts, therefore, can be caused by disagreements over meaning — but, says Spurrett, they are not caused by what conflicting parties might have in common. This, however, is precisely what Harris claims, namely that the historic disagreement was a result of a shared belief in words as mirror-images of reality:

> Galileo and the Church came into conflict not so much because they had different models of celestial mechanics but because they shared the same old reocentric model of semantics (Harris 2005, 131).

Elsewhere in *The Semantics of Science*, Harris (2005, 3) also mentions another constellation, i.e. one scientist adhering to a reocentric model of meaning and the other

scientist adhering to a psychocentric model. Harris tells us that 'sooner or later communication between them seems destined to break down.' Crucially, both scenarios involve psychocentrism, but in different ways. The conflict between Galileo and 'the Church' could not have been of the second type. I shall now explain why.

Galileo 'questioned accepted ways of talking about the location and movement of certain large bodies in space' (Harris 2005, 132): 'accepted', not for reasons of linguistic normativity, but because this was how the Bible talked about extra-anthropic reality. Science had to exploit the very same linguistic materials to challenge Christian cosmology, or else it risked not being listened to in public: disagreements over meaning presuppose that those disagreeing speak the 'same language'. Galileo's *sotto voce* pronouncement ('Eppur si muove'), we are told by Harris (2005, 130), 'challenged the very definitions of terms designating the familiar heavenly bodies as bodies 'revolving around the earth'', i.e. key terms (like *planet*, *Mars*, *Venus*, etc.) that had hitherto been defined reocentrically. Galileo's pronouncement disrupted established linguistic usage: as Harris (2005, 130) rightly observes, 'there was no way that the use of the verb ['to move'] could carry on quite as before.' In fact, it set science 'on a potential collision course with lay semantics.' It introduced an epistemological relativism sanctioned by 'the language', which lay observers seized upon: 'You could say (with Galileo) that the earth moves, or you could say (with his adversaries) that it does not move' (Harris 2005, 131). Lay semantic allegiances thus shifted from reocentric to psychocentric: what the verb 'to move' could be applied to was relative to the conception of (or belief about) motion that one adopted. But Galileo's semantic innovations were not meant to relativise truth; crucially, Galileo thought that ordinary language *could* be applied to reality: he was both a reocentric scientist and a 'semantic continuity' theorist.

If indeed Galileo and the Church 'shared the same old reocentric model of semantics', they must also have shared another mythical belief: the 'myth of reference' (Harris 2009b); according to the latter, reference is both stable and context-independent. A typical feature of the two myths is the 'sidestepping of the role played by participants in a communication situation' (Harris 2009b, 49). Together they invite us to accept that various types of expressions *ideally* mean (i.e. have reference) without any efforts on the part of those who are using them to make statements or interpret them, respectively. Harris (2005, 4) believes that the majority of scientists look upon 'the commitment to reocentrism as the essential characteristic of the language of science.' This commitment typically includes the myth of reference. However, the commitment is not unique to the scientific community. Expert communities in general will regard their terminology as reocentrically defined and shared by all members: internal communication is assumed to be unproblematic, and communicational concerns thus negligible. However, when these experts need to communicate with outsiders, for whatever reasons (e.g. because they think it their duty to challenge the knowledge treasured within another epistemic community), it soon transpires that everyone involved may well understand the words used — but not their meanings! As science writer Michael Shermer observed, referring to 'mixed' communication situations between scientists and 'spiritualists':

> All we're saying is that before you use words, let's define them carefully, and see if there's actually any evidence or data for this or not, before we

just hook ourselves to it — as a belief system (Shermer 2010).

If it turns out that there is no 'evidence' or 'data', the reocentric surrogationalist (here: the scientists) can claim a victory over the psychocentric surrogationalist (here: the 'spiritualists'): according to the former, in fact, the latter is unable to provide reocentric definitions for the terms in dispute. However, this is a linguistic illusion – for how are the reocentric surrogationalists to prove that their (supposedly reocentrically defined) words are not also words 'standing for' ideas in the mind? In fact, once you venture out of your reocentric Eden, 'Adamic semantics' cease working. A battle over the ownership of words is thus fought on the public fields of language.[3] It is also true, however, that expert communities are not always as homogeneous as portrayed above: in fact, the scientific community can be (deeply) divided on a particular issue; the division is brought about by an 'unresolved conflict between reocentric and psychocentric epistemologies' (Harris 2009a, 50).[4]

Harris' claim is supported by empirical observations I made in connection with my own fieldwork (Pablé 2009; 2010). Let me explain in what sense. The research involved a local (Swiss-Italian) community — a community consisting of 'experts' of their own socio-geographical space. The method I used was simple: I randomly stopped people in the street, who were unaware of being 'informants' in a study, and confronted them with a factual question: they were asked to identify a place based on a proper name I provided.[5] The place-names I used were not invented ones, but local variants I had collected in a previous (segregational) sociolinguistic study. The factual question I asked my informants was challenging insofar as the names supplied were either historical (mostly obsolete) ones or in-group names with little diffusion; at the same time they were fairly transparent and credible as 'real' names. However, I also needed to put my question in a context: thus I told my informants that I, a non-local, was in need of help because a friend of mine, whom I identified as a member of the 'native' community, had left a message on my voicemail asking me to meet him in town at [x]; I added that he hadn't left me any explanations as to where or what this place was, and couldn't presently be reached on his mobile phone.[6] The story created a communication situation in which

[3] For present-day examples of how orthodox scientists display their commitment to reocentrism in onto-epistemological disputes with the 'enemies of science' (see Pablé 2011).

[4] Harris (2009a, 49-55) argues that this was precisely the case when Darwin wrote *The Origin of Species*. Darwin's reluctance to provide a definition of the term *species* for his readers was due, according to Harris, to the fact that other naturalists had already supplied their own definitions (however, finding no consensus), i.e. they had 'discussed words and ideas' and not 'the phenomenon in the natural world'. Thus, Darwin found himself unable to conduct the discussion in appropriate reocentric terms, given that the various members in the expert community disagreed about what the term *species* refers to. In fact, the latter was already semantically 'infected' before this particular chapter in the book of Nature was written at all.

[5] Alternatively, informants were asked to establish the 'proper' name for a referent I supplied them with. However, informants were only told what class of object the referent belonged to, i.e. a castle: in the community under scrutiny, in fact, there are *three* castles.

[6] On various occasions I also told informants that the appointment at [x] was scheduled at time [y]. Hence, if an encountered occurred late in the morning, I would tell informants that I was supposed to meet my friend at noon (without, however, specifying that we would meet 'for

'experts' (the physically present informants) interacted with a 'non-expert', who in turn had previously communicated with another 'expert' (my friend, who was physically absent during the street encounters). The informants embarked on the task naturally assuming that the place where I was supposed to meet my friend was *real*. (Otherwise what's the point of arranging to meet someone?). They must have assumed, moreover, that the name I mentioned to them was a reocentrically defined name, provided by someone whose factual knowledge was the same as theirs — not a name standing for an idea in a stranger's head, who couldn't find his way round. At the same time, however, quite a number of informants seemed at a loss to address the factual question in appropriate reocentric terms. In some sense, and quite paradoxically, *the true unknown was the name provided by me*: had my friend really mentioned *that* name? And indeed some informants would, independently, point out that this name might not be correct, suggesting slightly different (i.e. similar-sounding) ones instead. For them, the mistake had to be on my part — not on my friend's. In cases where I approached groups of people, there often was disagreement, i.e. informants either corrected each other's name attributions or complemented them by adding further name variants for a single referent.

It would seem that answering the factual question I raised in those encounters constitutes a prime example of a straight reocentric task, which requires matching a name with a referent; however, what my informants actually did was to locally contextualise the different pieces of information available to them (i.e. those deliberately, and sparsely, provided by me as the interaction progressed), which were mostly irrelevant to 'reference itself', so as to be able to handle my inquiry – not in relation to the unknown referent – but in relation to me, i.e. someone unfamiliar with the local terrain. In fact, such contingent factors as the supposed time of the meeting, its purpose, the accessibility of a meeting-point, the location where the interviews took place, whether or not I had a car at my disposal, etc. influenced the outcome of the inquiry in crucial (and quite unpredictable) ways. Therefore, while the signs of first-order reality were clearly integrational (i.e. three-dimensional) signs, the target signs were surrogational (i.e. two-dimensional) signs — abstractions, whose existence informants presupposed because factual questions had to be impersonal questions. However, once factual questions are raised in this kind of 'mixed' communication situations, the contested signs are inevitably partisan signs.

The local community investigated by me is one characterized by a complex degree of name variation (especially when it comes to its historical buildings, places and streets). The 'native' members of the community claim expertise over how the socio-geographical space is labelled, i.e. they cling to a reocentric ideal, according to which each local referent has a very limited number of names — those with which they are familiar themselves — that identify it. Names unknown to my informants, or referentially ambiguous ones, were 'suspicious' to them insofar as they could be mere ideas elaborated in (non-local) people's minds. The locals' expertise is somehow comparable to that of scientists who spend a lot of their time looking into a microscope or a telescope: they

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lunch'). Adding what time the meeting was to take place increased the immediate need for me to find out what object proper name [x] referred to, and this made my inquiry even more credible (from the point of view of the informants).

possess the sort of 'evidence of the senses' (Jones 2013, 17) that non-experts lack. Moreover, the communication situations in my study also involved disagreements over meaning concerning things in the material reality, like the Galileo-Bellarmine controversy: in fact, the semantic innovation introduced by my inquiry threatened to disrupt established linguistic usage. Some informants assumed that the place under scrutiny was also known under a different — a reocentrically defined — name ('did your friend mention any other names?'), or, alternatively, they decided that the name provided by me was not what my friend had actually said. Eventually, some of the informants decided that I should go to this or that place, but in doing so they didn't address the factual question I had asked, i.e. 'What place does name [x] identify?': their response was geared to another question, namely 'Where is a local most likely to meet a non-local, given the information presently available?' [7]

Two conclusions follow from all this: firstly, disagreements about states of affairs in the external world presuppose a shared belief in reocentric semantics on the part of the interactants; secondly, factual questions do not exist in a communicational vacuum, i.e. questions (and answers) are always context-sensitive. Spurrett, in turn, seems to think that the 'factual question' and the 'debate over it' are separable: the evidence available on either side already constitutes the (yet to be communicated) answer to the factual question: Galileo had the evidence of the senses, whereas Bellarmine had the evidence of the Scriptures. But unless the evidence and its communication are *integrated*, there is no way to make the evidence accessible to others — and to integrate them is already to contextualize the signs: no impersonal sign could possibly survive it.

Does any 'grand question' presuppose a surrogational semantic theory on the part of those raising and answering it? *I don't think so.* For the 'grand question' Galileo asked – or Darwin, at it were — is markedly different from the 'grand question' integrationists ask (i.e. 'What is human communication, and what is its role in human life?'), in at least one crucial respect: its subject matter is strictly anthropic and discussing it meaningfully does not call for any excursions outside anthropic Nature.

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[7] And in fact some informants advised me to go respectively to the police station or the tourist office, where presumably I would be given the factual answer I needed.

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