

*Truth and Generosity: How Truth Makes Language Possible* by Neal O. Weiner and Tina Lee Forsee. Independently published, 2023, 108 pages, \$14.99 (hardback), \$9.25 (paperback)

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*Truth and Generosity* is a succinct, cogent, and very clear investigation into how we make sense of language, literature, and culture. It was partly inspired by Donald Davidson's philosophy of language. The authors of *Truth and Generosity* are Neal Weiner and Tina Lee Forsee. Weiner is a Plato scholar who taught at Marlboro College for 37 years and was educated at St. Johns's College, the University of Chicago, and the University of Texas, where he obtained his Ph.D. Forsee is his collaborating author and editor, who specializes in philosophy and fiction.

*Truth and Generosity* is exceedingly well-written and accessible to general audiences. But it also powerfully challenges some fundamental postmodernist ideas. For example, it attacks Sapir and Whorf's relativistic claims that language compels different views of the world and different societies live in distinct worlds, "not merely the same world with different labels attached" (Sapir, 1929, p. 209). *Truth and Generosity* argues that "The very fact that we can communicate with each other and translate other languages into our own means there must be a vast body of belief we all share . . . *Truth is the condition that makes language possible*" (p. iv).

The authors' attack on relativism begins with the principle of generosity (a greatly extended version of Davidson's principle of charity, which Weiner actually developed on his own). The point is that words are so ambiguous, and their combinations are so idiomatic, figurative, and eccentric that abundant generosity is required to interpret them. The principle of generosity thus says that to best understand people's words and outlooks, we should choose the interpretation that is most likely to be true (p. 6). Such generosity is often lacking in political discourse, where opponents willfully misconstrue each other's words.

Pursuing these topics, the authors investigate language development. They note that the demand for literal truth is characteristic of Western philosophy and

science but less characteristic of poetry and Eastern philosophy, which often rely on metaphors and imagery that do not readily contradict each other (p. 16ff). Natural language is also quite metaphorical and poetic, for its word meanings largely evolve by metaphorical extensions (e.g., cool, neat, lousy, stinks, handy, catty), which makes language highly figurative in nature (pp. 18, 30f).

Continuing on the topic of language development, the authors argue that our natural language is neither a code, invention, nor convention. Natural language does resemble codes (e.g., Morse code) in that both use symbols that have little intuitive connection to what they signify. But Morse code is strictly literal in that it mechanically uses dashes, dots, etc. to represent letters, words, etc., without any ambiguity. In contrast, the closest that natural language (including in its more formal settings) comes to literal meaning is with metaphors that have become so familiar that their figurative nature is now overlooked (brilliant scholar, colossal bore). Such words thus remain quite ambiguous p. 21f).

Nor was language invented like Morse code was. Such inventions require self-conscious, systematic thought, which in turn requires speech. So, “the invention of speech is an incoherent idea” (p. 24).<sup>1</sup> Similarly, language is not a convention. Systematically assigning meanings to words requires abilities to not only speak, but also speak about speaking. So, language is not an elaborate invention or table of conventions. Instead, it develops by far subtler processes of evolving usage (involving figurative extensions and deviations of words such as *stinky* turning into a general pejorative). In these processes, people make sense of changing words through their shared beliefs and the principle of generosity, which urges us to understand people’s words and outlooks by choosing the interpretation that is most likely to be true (pp. 23–41).

Having thus shown how the principle of generosity operates in the development of everyday language, the authors turn to the principle’s philosophical implications. Again, this greatly extends Davidson’s views. The general argument is that the “principle of generosity underlies all communication whatsoever and thereby guarantees the unified, public character of anything worth calling a world” (p. 42).

Their targets here are postmodernist assumptions of the 1960s that deny there is any superior account of the world. On these assumptions, conflicting accounts correspond to alternative worlds, not just the same world with different labels attached (p. 43f). This cultural relativism was tied to cultural determinism, in which different cultures and languages determine different world views.

The authors argue that this determinism is based on empirical misconceptions, such as that the Chinese must have a different conception of time from ours because their language has no tenses. In fact, the Chinese adverbs do mark time

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<sup>1</sup> While Esperanto was invented, it is just an elaborate code that translates symbols into symbols.

(p. 71). The authors add that even if there were empirical evidence that grammars do fundamentally differ, this by itself does not show that cultures actually think in fundamentally different ways (p. 71f).

Moreover, these relativistic and deterministic accounts of language and thought overlook the principle of generosity. People must share a vast body of beliefs in order to understand each other (pp. 70–83.). Without these beliefs, interactions ultimately become unintelligible, and other languages and intelligences are unrecognizable. These beliefs are thus on the whole indispensable and (practically speaking) true. They involve beliefs about space, time, and material being that allow us to make sense of the world. The authors point out that all this precludes prevalent claims that truth is relative to different cultures.

*Truth and Generosity* is at its most eloquent and visionary in portraying the principle of generosity as a teleological principle for intelligibility in all spheres of human endeavor — akin to Plato’s supreme form of the Good. The principle of generosity offers an account of what it means to make sense. It can thus serve this teleological role of binding things into an intelligible whole (p. 97).

The principle of generosity is thus an interpretive ideal — like a pragmatic Kantian regulative idea — at higher levels of literature and theorizing. The truest interpretation is the one that best fits the parts into a coherent whole (p. 90f). Here, the principle of generosity, in which things must be assumed to make sense, runs alongside the principle of sufficient reason, in which to make sense means “there is a reason for every part; every detail serves as a means to the whole. The whole serves as an end, giving meaning to the part” (p. 97).

My own ideas relate to Weiner and Forsee’s intriguing ideas in three ways. The first concerns their argument against claims that truth is culturally relative.

### *Is Truth Culturally Relative?*

Weiner and Forsee counter claim that truth is culturally relative by pointing out that cultures communicate and interact and therefore must share vast amounts of non-relative beliefs indispensable to making sense of the world. They argue that these shared foundational beliefs about the world are interpreted in terms of the principles of generosity and sufficient reason.

I would only add here that these foundational features include perceptions as well as beliefs. There is considerable experimental evidence (from Sperling, 1960 to Lamme, 2020) for foundational (brute, preattentive) levels of perception, such as the basic contours of objects. These foundational percepts must exist for us to communicate and interact. If percepts were endlessly re-interpretable, perception would collapse into dream. As in Escher prints, nowhere could we point and say that “this is real.”

Of course, individuals experiencing illusions may temporarily see my outstretched hand as a writhing snake. But we can still be said to inhabit the same

reality if our foundational percepts generally align. This also applies to the speculative worlds and dimensions of quantum physics. They are real insofar as there is evidence for them in our fundamental percepts. So, a shared reality arguably requires shared beliefs and percepts.

### *Is There Evidence that Language Determines Thought?*

As noted above, Weiner and Forsee argue that there is little empirical evidence for claims that different languages determine different world views. I would elaborate on this argument a bit by adding that we can not move from observations that languages differ to conclusions that underlying thought processes differ without checking for differences in underlying thought processes independently of differences in languages. Otherwise, we simply assume what we set out to prove.

For example, the Nootka treat “the stone falls” as “it stoness downward” (Sapir, 1924). Determinists see this as evidence of a fundamentally different set of categories than those articulated by Aristotle or Kant, in that the Nootka replace our category of object with the category of process. However, independent evidence of these conceptual categories is needed. For example, the Nootka may merely express in a unique way the universal propensity of human beings to conceptualize their world in terms of objects in the process of interacting. After all, objects and processes seem conceptually interdependent. For example, can we say that everything consists of vibrations without explaining what it is that vibrates?

### *How Do Language and Thought Affect Each Other?*

Weiner and Forsee argue that language was not created by deliberate reflections, for the latter requires speech and the systematic thinking it fosters. Instead, language arose from subtle figurative extensions interpreted by shared beliefs and generosity. This sensible argument raises a question: How does the authors’ argument that deliberate, reflective thought does not create language align with their argument above that language does not determine thought? I would argue that both arguments might be further enhanced by showing how they can fit together in a single theory of how thought and language affect each other.

Of relevance here are Vygotsky’s (1962, 1978) arguments that thought and language are *independent* entities that *synergize* (i.e., work together to do what they can not do apart). I have elaborated upon this synergistic approach as follows (Jones, 1995a, 1995b).

To start with, Vygotsky argues that the roots of thought and language are at least partly independent of each other. Infants and non-human animals exhibit a pre-intellectual form of language and a pre-linguistic form of thought. Also, thought and language can be impaired independently of one another. Furthermore, languages are at least in part elaborate cultural artifacts that thought must

struggle to internalize and struggle to express itself through. Thought is not a series of words and is in fact often difficult to put into words.

This synergistic approach confronts claims that thought determines language and that language determines thought. For example, Piaget (1967) often seems to treat language as a mere outgrowth of, and a mere vehicle for, thought. However, language transforms thought profoundly at its highest stages (e.g., during formal education). On the other hand, Whorf (1956) claims that different languages compel different kinds of thought. However, research shows that language influences different kinds of thought in different ways and degrees. Furthermore, language does not even emerge until after the early foundations of thought (including object permanence) develop, as Piaget rightly noted.

So, language need not be seen as an imprisoning cage for thought nor a passive vehicle for thought. Arguably, thoughtful language and symbolic thought emerged synergistically. To begin with, it was the growing powers of thought that allowed language to become symbolic rather than instinctual, making language more voluntary and flexible — and giving us the power to talk about anything in any way. In turn, due to language, thought was no longer immediately bound to perceptual stimuli. It was mediated by symbols and ideas. We could represent and manipulate the world internally through symbolic thought. Symbolism also reinforced thought by making it more abstract, systematic, and coordinated.

Arguably, it is this synergy of thought and language that makes humans so distinctive. Symbolism produced more organized, resourceful, and interactive minds and societies. The result was more richly meaningful, elaborately planned, and complexly channeled forms of life. Language is a unique tool, for we have turned it inward to master ourselves, our inner potentials. It makes action more reflective, voluntary, and planned. It allows us to construct complex structures of society and thought. It is the basis of the most uniquely human forms of society and thought. It leads beyond the confined world of beasts to the wide-open possibilities of civilization and reason.<sup>2</sup>

However, our symbolic thought is not just the source of our distinctive powers but also our distinctive limitations. We have lifted our eyes from the limited perceptual horizons of beasts and gazed out into a conceptual universe of ideas whose endless possibilities produce not just our free will but also our peculiar predicament. The human predicament is that due to our abstract symbolic thought, we lack both the sure instinctual guidance of beasts and the omniscience of God. We are left in between, in a world of eternal conflicts, intractable dilemmas, and bewildering possibilities. As Oakeshott (1962, p. 60) said, “Man sails a boundless

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<sup>2</sup>This approach contrasts with rationalism and empiricism, which assume that all humans think basically the same way (via reasoning or associations, respectively). For in the synergy above, thought has shifted to increasingly expansive levels of organization, each with greater conceptual power and mobility, thus leading humans to greater powers for self-awareness, self-mastery, and free will.

and bottomless sea; there is neither harbour for shelter, nor floor for anchor, neither starting-place nor appointed destination.”

This synergistic approach may thus help fit together Weiner and Forsee’s two arguments that deliberate, reflective thought does not create language and that language does not determine thought. Recall the full argument in the former: *deliberate reflections could not have created language because these deliberate reflections require speech and the systematic thinking it fosters; instead, language arose from subtle figurative extensions interpreted by shared beliefs and generosity.* The synergistic approach might modify this slightly. While vocabulary evolves in subtle figurative ways, grammar may have required some deliberate planning, but just at prerational levels.

In this manner, the synergistic approach posits three stages. (1) Animal thought can involve clever problem-solving. But animal language relies primarily on innate links between signals and the objects referred to, while human language relies primarily on culturally formed links. (2) Human language among nomadic bands and tribal villages includes complex noun declensions, verb conjugations, and moods. Their thought is preliterate and takes poetic and mythopoeic forms (imagery) at prerational, preoperational levels. (3) Literate thought among civilized societies consists of abstract, systematic thinking (reasoning) at rational, operational levels. Language is relatively abstract and hierarchical, as in scientific and legal thinking.

In this scheme, symbolic thought and language, including grammar, arose in stage (2). So, the argument above that *deliberate, reflective* thought does not create language should perhaps be slightly modified to say that *rational* thought does not do so — yet *prerational* thought likely did do so.

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