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Truth as a Cultural Value

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ABSTRACT

Gila Sher (2025) puts forward a theory of truth that is founded on a thought-provoking strategy for thinking about truth's nature. According to this strategy, in attempting to develop an account of truth's nature, we should foreground the fact that truth is an intrinsic human value. In this brief commentary, I will argue that truth is best described as a cultural, rather than a human, value. I will then explore the ramifications that this has for Sher's strategy for thinking about truth's nature.

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1 Culture, truth concepts, and valuing truth

Sher offers an extended defence of what she calls the *value theory of truth*. We can treat the value theory as consisting of three core theses (compare Sher 2025: 25–6):

- (VT₁) Truth is an intrinsic human value
- (VT₂) Because truth is an intrinsic human value, humans have developed certain 'truth norms'
- (VT₃) A truth-bearer is true iff it satisfies the truth norms.

One of the most intriguing aspects of the value theory is the strategy for thinking about truth's nature that underwrites it. According to this strategy—which I will call the *value-first strategy*—we should first observe that truth is an intrinsic human value and then develop an account of truth's nature on the basis of this observation.

In what follows, I will offer an extended evaluation of the value-first strategy. My root concern with Sher's implementation of the strategy is that it fails to reflect cultural variation in attitudes towards truth.¹ When we account for this variation, we come to see (i) that truth is best described as a cultural, rather than a human, value; (ii) that what Sher calls 'truth norms' likely vary across cultures; and thus (iii) that the

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¹ For a brief discussion of two related points, see Wrenn (2025: 57).

A proper discussion of how to define 'culture' would require much more space than I have here. In what follows, I operate with a rough and ready notion of culture, leaving a fuller discussion for future work.

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value-first strategy motivates some underexplored ideas about truth's nature that are respectively grounded in contemporary discussions of truth pluralism and some remarks by Alfred Tarski.

I will start with (VT₁). For present purposes, we can set the issue of whether truth is an intrinsic or extrinsic value to one side, focusing squarely on whether truth is a *human* value. Sher (2025: 13) proposes that truth is a human value in the sense that valuing truth has been 'enshrined by our civilization as indicative of our humanity'.

In explaining what it is to value truth, Sher (*ibid.*) suggests that '[w]hat is valuable is certain *truth-attitudes/behaviour* by humans. It is valuable that *we be truthful*, that *we pursue truth in inquiry*, that *we regard truth as a value that is constitutive of our humanity*'. Additionally, she explains that 'our civilization' is meant to include 'all geographical regions where humans live and a very long swath of history, say, from ancient Mediterranean and Eastern cultures to the present day' (*ibid.*).

I will mention two case studies that raise concerns for the proposal that truth is a human value in this sense, and thus with (VT₁).² The first is the sixteenth-century Nahua people, whose thought about truth has been investigated by James Maffie (2002). Maffie draws our attention to the Nahuatl word *neltiliztli*, which is standardly translated as 'truth.' He offers several arguments against this standard translation, and proposes (2002: 75) instead that *neltiliztli* should be translated as 'well-rootedness-cum-*alethia*'.

Maffie's proposed translation of *neltiliztli* incorporates the Nahua concept of *teotl*, which is a 'single, vital, dynamic, vivifying, eternally self-generating and self-conceiving as well as self-regenerating and self-reconceiving sacred energy or force' (*ibid.*).³ According to Maffie's translation, for *neltiliztli* to be applicable to a cognition or an utterance, the cognition/utterance must be 'well rooted in *teotl* and ... that through which *teotl* discloses itself' (2002: 80). In short, while Maffie grants that *neltiliztli* is the best available Nahuatl translation of 'truth,' he also argues that this translation seriously misrepresents the meaning of *neltiliztli*. For these reasons, Maffie concludes that we should take the Nahua to have lacked a concept of truth.⁴

A second case study is the Ewe of West Africa. In a penetrating discussion of Ewe thought about truth, N.K. Dzobo (1992) identifies four concepts that are in use by present-day Ewe and that can be reasonably described as 'truth concepts.' The first is expressed by *nyatefe*, which Dzobo identifies as the most common translation of 'truth' into Ewe. Dzobo explains that '[t]ruth as *nyatefe* ... consists in a high degree of correspondence between the truth-claim and the objective state of affairs so stated; its validity also lies in its high degree of accuracy and reliability' (1992: 80). The truth concept expressed by *nyatefe* is, then, a correspondence concept.

An additional cluster of Ewe truth terms includes *nyanono/nyano*, *nyagbagbe*, and *nyagba*. Broadly speaking, the truth concept that is expressed by these terms has it that the truth of an idea consists in 'its power to bring about a better human situation and continuously to improve the conditions of life' (2002: 81). This truth concept can be fairly described as pragmatist, even as it clearly differs from, for instance, the account of truth that was championed by William James (1907).

² See also Hester and Cheney (2001), Kayange (2018), McLeod (2016, 2018), Mizumoto (2022), Thakchoe (2023), and Wiredu (1987). Cf. Matthewson and Glougie (2018).

³ For further discussion, see Maffie (2014).

⁴ For a concern that can be raised against this argument, see Van Norden (2007, § 1.B.2.B). I think that this concern can likely be resisted, but I lack the space to discuss it here.

The third Ewe truth concept is expressed by *nyadzodzoe*. According to this concept, true statements are ‘straight,’ or correct, statements, in the sense that they are supported by statements that have already been accepted as correct. Dzobo points out (2002: 82) that this concept is frequently used when two or more people are trying to settle a dispute.

The fourth Ewe truth concept is expressed by *anukware*, which is borrowed from Akan, another Ghanaian language, in which this word is spelled *nokware*. This concept takes the truth of a statement made by a particular person to consist in the statement’s consistency with other statements that they have made. In this way, this concept amounts to a coherence truth concept (2002: 82-3).

These case studies raise two concerns for Sher’s proposal that truth is a human value. If, as Maffie argues, the Nahua lacked a concept of truth, then it isn’t the case that the Nahua took valuing truth to be constitutive of humans’ humanity. Indeed, the Nahua would have lacked *any* attitudes whatsoever towards valuing truth. From this, it follows that truth is not a human value.

Secondly, if the Ewe use more than one truth concept, then suggesting that the Ewe take ‘valuing truth’ to be constitutive of humans’ humanity at best obscures the complexity in Ewe thought that Dzobo details. Whatever attitudes an Ewe person has towards ‘valuing truth,’ those attitudes will be about different practices in different contexts, depending upon which truth concept the person uses in the context. Given these limitations of the proposal that truth is human value, we might instead describe truth as a culturally-specific—or more briefly, a *cultural*—value.

2 Culture and truth norms

Let us now turn to (VT₂). Sher holds that because truth is an intrinsic human value, humans have developed certain *truth norms*. The truth norms are meant to guide and constrain our knowledge-gathering practices and to include the following (2025: 18):

- (N1) Our theories/sentences about the world should attribute to the world, or to objects in the world, properties it/they have, rather than properties it/they do not have.
- (N2) Search for truth. Not just for truths whose knowledge provides material benefits, but for truths which provide knowledge for its own sake. In particular, search for significant truths. Be willing to expand your energy, effort, and resources on searching for such truths.
- (N3) Search for effective routes of correspondence. Be willing to replace the standard routes of reference and correspondence by new, innovative routes, according to need.

In short, my concern with (VT₂) is that since truth appears to be a cultural, rather than a human, value, it is unlikely that there is a single set of ‘truth norms’ that applies across all cultures. If the Nahua lacked a concept of truth, then we can safely infer that they did not value truth. Moreover, if they did not value truth, then the Nahua wouldn’t have developed any truth norms.

If the Ewe use the four truth concepts that Dzobo outlines, then it is likely that they have also developed distinct sets of truth norms that respectively incorporate these truth concepts. For instance, if the Ewe have developed anything like Sher’s (N1)

and (N3), then these norms will presumably pertain to the concept expressed by *nyatefe*. By contrast, it seems that the Ewe translations of (N1) and (N3) won't pertain to the concepts expressed by the pragmatist-leaning *nyanono/nyano*, *nyagbagbe*, or *nyagba*, the normative *nyadzodzoe*, or the coherentist *anukware*. This suggests that the Ewe have likely developed at least two, and potentially even more, sets of truth norms.

3 Culture and truth's nature: a pluralistic option

Lastly, let us consider (VT₃), which represents the culmination of the value-first strategy. (VT₃) is meant to articulate conditions that are both necessary and sufficient for a truth-bearer to be true. It will be convenient to relabel it as follows:

(T) A truth-bearer is true iff it satisfies the truth norms.

Since she takes the truth norms to incorporate a correspondence-theoretic notion of truth, Sher's view (2025: 21–23) is that truth consists in correspondence (though correspondence can be either 'direct' or 'indirect,' depending on the 'facet of the world' at issue).

Having seen that truth is a cultural value, it now becomes apparent that rather than motivating a correspondence theory of truth's nature, the value-first strategy in fact motivates some rather novel ideas about truth's nature. One way to flesh out these ideas is to frame them as a new variety of *alethic pluralism*. In essence, alethic pluralism is the view that there is more than one way for a truth-bearer to be true (see Pedersen and Wright 2018). Pluralists standardly hold that the various ways of being true fragment across *domains*. In physics, for instance, it may be that a proposition is true iff it corresponds to physical reality, whereas in ethics, a proposition is true iff it coheres in some sense with a body of moral and non-moral propositions (see for instance Lynch (2009)).

In contrast to standard varieties of pluralism, the new variety that pairs naturally with the value-first strategy takes the various ways of being true to fragment both across cultures and across contexts that are occupied by members of a single culture. We might call this view *cultural alethic pluralism*.

We've seen that we have reason to believe (a) that humans in some cultures (for instance, the Nahua) have not developed truth norms of any sort and (b) that humans in other cultures (for instance, the Ewe) have developed multiple sets of truth norms, each of which is applicable in certain contexts. In light of this, the cultural alethic pluralist proposes that we rephrase Sher's (T) as follows:

(T^P) A truth-bearer x is true in culture R and context C iff (i) there is a set of truth norms N that is used by members of R in C and (ii) x satisfies N .

In cultures like that of the Nahua, condition (i) fails to hold. As a result, (T^P) generates a striking consequence—that in cultures of this sort, there are *no* true truth-bearers. The theory of truth that will apply within these cultures is what is often called *alethic nihilism* (see for instance Gamester (2023) and Liggins (2019)).

(T^P) also entails that in cultures like that of the Ewe, there are *multiple* ways for a truth-bearer to be true. In such cultures, people use truth norms N_1 in context C_1 , N_2 in context C_2 , and so on for all of the sets of truth norms N_i used by members of the

Table 1. Cultural alethic pluralism

Types of culture	Truth-conditions within cultures
Culture R_1 that has developed no truth norms	None; there are no true truth-bearers in R_1
Culture R_2 that has developed a single set N of truth norms	Truth-bearer x is true in R_2 iff x satisfies N
Culture R_3 that has developed distinct sets N_1, N_2, \dots, N_i of context-specific truth-norms	Truth-bearer x is true in R_3 iff x satisfies N_1 in C_1 , satisfies N_2 in C_2 , or \dots , or satisfies N_i in C_i

culture. This means that in such cultures, a truth-bearer x can be true in virtue of satisfying N_1 in C_1 , satisfying N_2 in C_2 , or \dots , or satisfying N_i in C_i .

It is also possible that there is a third sort of culture whose members have developed exactly *one* set of truth norms N which are meant to apply in any context. (T^P) entails that in cultures of this sort, a truth-bearer x is true iff x satisfies N . Table 1 provides an overview of cultural alethic pluralism.

4 Culture and truth's nature: a Tarskian option

Cultural alethic pluralism is one option for an adherent of the value-first strategy who recognises that truth is a cultural value. Some may urge, however, that it is simply a bridge too far. It may seem sensible enough to grant that members of different cultures have used different truth concepts and may have even lacked truth concepts altogether. It may also seem sensible to grant that which truth norms people develop is partially determined by the truth concepts that are used within their cultures. But the idea that the *conditions* that must be satisfied for a truth-bearer to be true are indexed to culture—that may seem well-nigh incomprehensible.

With this sort of concern in mind, it is worth noting that the adherent of the value-first strategy also has a second option. This option is grounded in remarks that Tarski offers in a different setting:

We should reconcile ourselves with the fact that we are confronted, not with one concept, but with several different concepts[.] [W]e should try to make these concepts as clear as possible (by means of definition, or of an axiomatic procedure, or in some other way); to avoid further confusions, we should agree to use different terms for different concepts; and then we may proceed to a quiet and systematic study of all concepts involved, which will exhibit their main properties and mutual relations. (Tarski 1944: 355)

Applied to the present discussion, the Tarskian idea is that instead of indexing truth to culture and context as in (T^P), we should simply 'agree to use different terms for different concepts'. In doing so, we would adopt a theory of truth that incorporates multiple variants of Sher's original (T). The resultant theory would contain biconditionals like the following. Here, the 'truth norms' are the truth-theoretic epistemic norms that guide and constrain the knowledge-gathering practices of those who use the word 'truth,' and similarly for the '*nyatefe* norms,' the '*nyanono* norms,' and so on:

(T₁) A truth-bearer is true iff it satisfies the truth norms

(T₂) A *nyatefe*-bearer has *nyatefe* iff it satisfies the *nyatefe* norms

(T₃) A *nyanono*-bearer has *nyanono* iff it satisfies the *nyanono* norms.

Unlike cultural alethic pluralism, this Tarskian view doesn't commit us to saying that the conditions for being true are indexed to culture. Whether this is in the end

an advantage or a cost will have to remain an open question for now. At the very least, I hope to have shown that since truth is a cultural value, Sher's value-first strategy compels us to entertain some ideas about truth that are not usually on our radar.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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