

# Contemporary and future directions of analytic philosophy: Commentary on Jaakko Hintikka, “Philosophical Research: Problems and Prospects”

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**Dale Jacquette**

University of Bern, Switzerland

## Philosophy in crisis?

I am enormously pleased to participate in the UNESCO-supported panel discussion on the State and Prospects of Philosophical Research, organized by Adam Senet, at the American Philosophical Association meeting in San Francisco, CA, 2 April 2010. The topic greatly interests and sometimes concerns me, and I am grateful for the opportunity to have commented on Jaakko Hintikka’s insightful presentation that set the stage for our early evening’s further deliberations.

For simplicity and the sake of argument, I follow Hintikka’s lead and confine my remarks to *theoretical* philosophy in the sense Jaakko mentions as found in Scandinavia and Scotland—to which I would also add Switzerland, where, incidentally, I currently direct the Lehrstuhl für *theoretische* Philosophie in the Institut für Philosophie, Universität Bern. Where contemporary theoretical philosophy is concerned, the first thing I want to say is that I have no anxiety either about the present course or future direction of philosophy. I am a fatalist about the historical fortunes of ideas, including but not limited only to philosophical ideas. Things have their season, including interest in philosophy. Philosophy has nevertheless been around since before the natural sciences to which it gave rise, and it will undoubtedly outlive us and our students and their students for as long as anything recognizably like human culture and civilization endures.

## Embarrassment of philosophical riches

The reasons for my optimism against the proposal that philosophy is currently in a state of methodological crisis are threefold:

- (1) The problems that philosophy addresses are perennial *conceptual* difficulties that in principle are incapable of being competently managed by any of the natural sciences; rather, the natural sciences must continually rely on philosophy to set the standards of rigor for logical explanation, and to critically examine minimally the meaning and

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### Corresponding author:

Dale Jacquette, Universität Bern, Länggassstrasse 49a, CH-3000, Bern 9, Switzerland.

Email: dale.jacquette@philo.unibe.ch

epistemic status of scientific concepts. This is especially to be expected in constantly changing scientific fields like theoretical physics and cosmology. The more the natural sciences advance, the more work there is for philosophy to do, a limitless demand for philosophical reflection.

- (2) Philosophy, even in its theoretical component, is vocationally involved in the challenge of understanding *values* that by their very nature are invisible to the observational and controlled experimental methods of the natural sciences. Again, the proper grasp of human values is only enhanced and made more urgent, but is never replaced, by the progress of the natural sciences toward improved theoretization and engineering control of the facts of phenomenal experience.
- (3) The very same problems with which theoretical philosophy in our tradition first began have remained inspirational for continued research since the time of their inception in ancient Greece. The topics that preoccupy philosophers are not going away; they present themselves with new significance and special urgency in every succeeding generation.

Thus, I do not share Hintikka's sense that there is a contemporary "crisis" in philosophical research. I am continually astonished and delighted at the wealth of new developments in philosophy, whose current trends appear inexhaustible, even overwhelming. In a book I recently edited on *Philosophy of Logic*, to which Hintikka was also a contributor, I referred in this instance to the proliferation of modal logics, free logics, fuzzy and other inductive logics, many- and gap-valued logics, and so on, as the *Logic Candy Store* (Jacquette, 2007a; see Hintikka and Sandu, 2007). Speaking for the moment of philosophical logic only, we are a long way from Kant's pronouncement in 1787 that logic has not progressed since the time of Aristotle. Kant writes:

That logic has already, from the earliest times, proceeded upon this sure path is evidenced by the fact that since Aristotle it has not required to retrace a single step, unless, indeed, we care to count as improvements the removal of certain needless subtleties or the clearer exposition of its recognized teaching, features which concern the elegance rather than the certainty of the science. It is remarkable also that to the present day this logic has not been able to advance a single step, and is thus to all appearance a closed and completed body of doctrine. (Kant, 1965: B viii)

The situation that Kant describes as dominating logic from the time of Aristotle to his own day was indeed a kind of crisis for eighteenth-century logic and theoretical philosophy. However, it is certainly not the situation today.

### **(Over-) specialization in philosophy**

If anything, the result has been a worrying tendency that Hintikka does not mention, one that parallels the advance of modern science. I refer in particular to the trend toward excessively narrow *specialization* in philosophy.

How can one cope with the floruit of publications even in logic, semantics, philosophy of mind, philosophy of science, or any other subdiscipline, without limiting one's attention, reading and writing time, teaching interests, and the like, to something more manageable than the broad contemporary canvas of whatever intellectual work deserves to be called theoretical philosophy? There is great pressure as a result to concentrate on specific areas of philosophy. Not only, for example, on philosophy of mathematics in general, but even more microscopically, say, on constructivist set theory within the philosophy of mathematics.

To try to master the ever-burgeoning literature and keep abreast of all new developments in highly specialized fields, to make contributions where possible to ongoing discussions, or to take work in the area as a point of departure for a research program that may be equally constrained but that represents a new direction, is arguably the order of the day. We might try to persuade ourselves that we cannot survive in the profession unless we gain expertise in and become known for and associated with a particular highly circumscribed cluster of well-defined and currently fashionable topics in philosophy. How often do we not offer well-meaning advice in something like this form to prospective PhD students?

When we are tempted to do so, we should recall that philosophy need not take its marching orders from the distinctive ethos of the natural sciences. I admire very much in this context what Wittgenstein writes in the Foreword to the *Philosophical Remarks*, edited from the so-called *Big Typescript*, when he explains:

This book is written for such men as are in sympathy with its spirit. This spirit is different from the one which informs the vast stream of European and American civilization in which all of us stand. That spirit expresses itself in an onwards movement, in building ever larger and more sophisticated structures; the other in striving after clarity and perspicuity in no matter what structure. The first tries to grasp the world by way of its periphery — in its variety; the second at its centre — in its essence. And so the first adds one construction to another, moving on and up, as it were, from one stage to the next, while the other remains where it is and what it tries to grasp is always the same. (Wittgenstein, 1975: 7)

Nor do we have to be or to become full-fledged later Wittgensteinians in order to appreciate Wittgenstein's distinction between the course that science has taken our civilization and the multiple pathways that philosophy might choose to pursue in its own unique modes and with its own unique methodologies. My own work in philosophy, which I do not propose to discuss in any detail, sometimes to my amusement and sometimes to my chagrin, has more than once been described as eclectic. The unkind turn of phrase one less charitably hears is "spread too thin." Nevertheless, I think that this is one of the legitimate pathways to be followed in philosophy, despite the contemporary motivations tending toward increasing specialization.

Jay Rosenberg used to characterize his own approach to the study of philosophy, on analogy with the medical professions, as that of a *generalist*. However, I am perfectly satisfied with the term "eclectic." Philosophy for me, and, I think, for many other philosophers as well, is a *personal* search for understanding, and, if you will, for enlightenment. I believe that this is why philosophers unlike teams of scientists in lab coats are not readily rounded up into research groups to be turned loose on research agendas in order to crank out results with which large numbers of other philosophers can nod their heads in agreement. It doesn't work that way in philosophy, nor should it. And this is so for good reasons that go back to philosophy's origins. Scientists report on discoveries; philosophers issue manifestos. As for the label "eclectic," in my own case, anyway, and speaking only for myself, I am pleased to wear the badge. I pursue my interests, and, as a logician I can tell you with some authority that my interests are my interests.

## On copia of words and ideas

Now let me turn more appreciatively and critically to some of the details of Hintikka's exposition. It should be apparent from what I have already said that I do not entirely share Hintikka's sense that philosophical research today is in some sort of crisis.

Variety and pluralism of perspective is the lifeblood of philosophy, as I view the subject, and we certainly have more of that in healthy abundance now than at any previous time. Not everything

that is done is to everyone's philosophical taste, and that is precisely the point, that there is work of many descriptions catering to many different philosophical outlooks. If we compare the work that is being accomplished in philosophy at this very moment, even by a casual survey of the books available in the field published in any recent year, and of the many conferences on fascinating philosophical topics taking place every season worldwide, with the production of earlier centuries in which you could practically count the number of active noteworthy philosophers practicing their trade on the fingers of one hand, then we easily come away with the sense that philosophy is flourishing more actively now and in more different interesting directions than at any previous time in its history.

Of course, Hintikka is not exercised over the *quantity* of recent philosophical publications. He might even see the contemporary voluminous outpouring in philosophy as yet another symptom of the problem he describes. It is a question rather of the *quality* of the work being done. Here too I must nevertheless maintain that I am considerably more sanguine than Hintikka about the general improvement in technical proficiency and rigor of argumentation in much of the writing one finds today in theoretical philosophy. It is hard to imagine a more exciting time in the adventure of ideas.

Hintikka explains the specific sense in which he speaks of a *crisis* in contemporary philosophical research as the lack of a direction or directions "guided by an awareness of ideas that could point out goals for philosophical research and open doors for reaching them." This I also do not see, unless Hintikka wants there to be a more unified direction than the plenitude of philosophical ideas and the directions for philosophical research that go with them, unless what he desires is that a *particular* direction be pursued, guided, perhaps, or even presumably, by his own particular ideas. Yet Hintikka, in asking "What might a 'stimulus package' for philosophy be like?," adds the important qualification, albeit in parentheses, after suggesting that philosophy needs to reorient itself, "(except for inevitably being controversial)."

Perhaps the remark was intended only as a heuristic device. However, I am troubled at the outset by Hintikka's expectation that there should likely be crises in philosophy because there have been a number of such crises in "the world at large," of which philosophy, he says, might "perhaps be seen as a microcosm." I am not at all sure in the first place that philosophy is plausibly understood as a microcosm of the world at large. If it is such, then I am even more unsure that there is good reason to expect that whatever happens in the world at large is likely to be more or less immediately reflected in philosophy. There might be a lag time of years, decades, or even centuries involved in any such mirroring. Moreover, there is counter-evidence to suggest that philosophy, like creative literature and the arts, leads its own life, independently of whatever is going on in the "real" world. For example, to my knowledge we never find philosophy flourishing during a culture's golden age, but only once decline has set in, and then more specifically as a rule, in the culture's silver age. Ancient Greece, Rome, and philosophy in France, Germany, the UK, and arguably also in the United States, certainly fit this pattern. Analogies worth pondering no doubt abound between philosophy and what happens in politics, economics, and conspicuous social movements. The question is always how far these analogies go, how exact the analogy should be regarded as being, and how seriously such analogies can responsibly be taken. I see no strong reason to expect that there are *likely* to be crises in *contemporary* philosophical research, just because there have lately occurred some glitches in the free market economy, or even something as dramatic as the collapse of the Soviet Union or the incremental emergence of (apparently non-oxymoronic) Chinese communist capitalism. Even if such correlations could be made out social-scientifically, I would need to be more powerfully convinced that any alleged parallelisms were not purely accidental.

As for philosophical ideas and directions toward goals for philosophical research, my own impression is that at the moment we are swimming in them. I would add that philosophical ideas are appearing in greater numbers, and with greater sophistication, nuance, and finesse, backgrounded

by a better appreciation of the conceptual alternatives and historical precedents for the astonishing copia of new philosophical ideas than ever before. The ideas and directions that are taking place in philosophy today might not all or even in large numbers be to Hintikka's liking. They might not represent the ideas that he espouses, or the directions for philosophical research that he would want to follow—but that, of course, is altogether another matter. Hintikka in his career has been remarkably effective in claiming a significant share of attention for his philosophical contributions within the marketplace of ideas, and deservedly so, which is all that any of us laboring in the vineyards of philosophy are ever entitled to expect.

The embarrassment of philosophical riches in ideas and directions I speak of is suggested by considering recent and contemporary work in intentionality in the philosophy of mind and action theory; consciousness studies; intensionalism in logic and the philosophy of logic and language, breaking the stranglehold that extensionalism has held on philosophy since the heyday of Frege, Russell, and the early Wittgenstein (all of whom I greatly admire, I should be quick to add); constructivism, physicalism, and inherentism in philosophy of mathematics; pioneering work on paraconsistent and dialethic logics; computerized proof theory; trope theory in the metaphysics of universals; artificial intelligence (still breathing, admittedly, albeit with an audible rasping); competing theories of mental causation; relative identity and identity theory more generally, theories of genidentity and the persistence of spatiotemporal objects; theories of reference and definite description; Gricean approaches to the analysis of meaning under conversational implicature; rigid designation and identity across logically possible worlds—etc., etc., on and on.

## Research paradigms in philosophy and science

The prevailing situation raises a further question of whether philosophy, by its very nature, is not *always* in a state of “crisis” in the sense that Hintikka describes. Whether, that is, it is not in the very nature of philosophy to appear at close range to lack research direction in its research from a worthy set of dominant guiding ideas. For wherever there is the philosophical drive toward asserting and developing a given set of ideas, there we can also expect an equal and contrary force opposing exactly those ideas. Perhaps we can never clearly see the forest for the trees when we consider philosophy in our own time, but only when philosophy has moved beyond its previous preoccupations and exhausted at least the former interest in and energy expended on its previous methodologies.

One might come skeptically to conclude as a result, looking at the sociology of philosophy and its metaphilosophy, that the unifying ideas that seem to move philosophy in its progress, whenever it seems to be progressing, are ultimately nothing more than the over-simplifying inventions of later historians of philosophy. Did George Berkeley, David Hume, and Thomas Reid share the kinds of ideas that Hintikka finds lacking today? There is no evidence I have encountered in studying these figures to suggest that they ever thought of themselves as taking part in a common research program, beyond resisting in their own distinctive ways the previous century's stultifying rationalism. Hume may stop to acknowledge Berkeley as a fellow-traveler in the bid to eliminate abstract general ideas from philosophy, or as skeptical about the intelligibility of the infinite divisibility of extension, but Hume also tips his hat to G.W. Leibniz, Nicolas de Malezieu, and others with whom he generally philosophically disagrees.

One wonders also whether philosophy would be better off without what Hintikka characterizes as its contemporary crisis. The important metaphilosophical question posed here, I suppose, is whether, for philosophy with its unique history to flourish at its best, philosophers should *cooperate* in a Hintikkan-sense-of-crisis-free philosophical research program, or whether philosophers should *compete* with one another hammer and tongs in exploring the extremes and meeting of extremes

at the deepest levels of ideological dispute, as they endeavor to carve out a particular corner of conceptual space. I do not pretend to know the answer to these questions, but it should be clear from what I have already argued that I lean considerably toward the second choice.

When one compares the current state of philosophical research with the situation, for example, in the seventeenth, eighteenth, or nineteenth centuries, it is hard to maintain that we are worse off than these previous epochs when such single-minded “paradigms” to extend Thomas Kuhn’s terminology applied to the history of natural science, as pure reason, empiricism, or, say, the critical transcendental idealism of Kant or Hegel, called the tune for so much of the creative work then being done in philosophy. I see no discouraging signs in any of this riot of ideas and research programs. Hurray for all of it, I say. On the contrary, I only wish I could keep up with more of it. Let it prosper, rise and fall, in its own time and under its own weight, and eventually be replaced by better ideas. I see no indication that the *process* has reached a point of stagnation or gridlock. My conclusion, based on my ongoing occasional, and in many areas unsystematic testing of the philosophical waters, is rather that the kids are alright.

### Philosophical inquiry as a search for truth

Let us turn now briefly in this connection also to two claims Hintikka makes about the current state and characteristic trends of theoretical philosophy. Hintikka laments the loss of philosophical respect for or interest among contemporary philosophers in contributing to the *truth*. He claims: “In our day, the predominant paradigm of a philosopher’s activity is not a scientific inquiry, but rather the exegesis of sacred texts or perhaps creative interpretation of the great works of world literature.” That some of this exegetical-oriented study outside of historical research takes place within analytic philosophy’s largesse I think no one could reasonably deny. I agree entirely also with Hintikka’s sentiment that abandoning the search for truth in philosophy would be an unwelcome development. I nevertheless disagree about the facts of the matter as Hintikka presents them.

The contemporary philosophers I know and read have by no means been tainted with postmodern cynicism about philosophy’s role in efforts to discover, systematize, and communicate the truth concerning its subjects. What is the evidence for such a momentous assertion? It is, besides, in my view at least, a perfectly legitimate question for theoretical philosophers to pose whether there is such a thing as truth, whether it is attainable, and the like. A similar situation exists in epistemology, where it has long been recognized as appropriate to consider and defend universal skepticism about the possibility of acquiring or innately possessing knowledge. Similarly in the philosophy of religion, where well-argued philosophical atheism is not considered today anyway as beyond the bounds of responsible philosophical reflection.

So, then, also, in principle, for such concepts as truth. In my own work in epistemology, for example, perhaps also to Hintikka’s horror, but I think with very good reasons, I have proposed that although the *concept* of truth is essential to the concept of justification in defining its aim, and hence by implication to the concept of knowledge, it functions in the analysis of knowledge as what I in Kantian terms would call a *regulative* rather than *constitutive* concept. Truth as a *condition* of knowledge, however, I believe should be expunged from the proper analysis of the concept, except insofar as it does duty reductively for a condition of maximally practically attainable *justification* as a genuine condition of knowledge. This is in part to avoid what I have called *epistemic hypocrisy*, when in practice we do not look for truth in any transcendental sense beyond what our best scientific means of justification can provide. The grounds for trimming truth from the traditional definition of knowledge as justified true belief is that (a) we thereby avoid Gettier counterexamples in an interesting way; (b) we preach what we practice in the pursuit of knowledge, disputes about which are always settled by appeal to the best justification rather than

independently attainable truths; (c) we better satisfy the demands of Ockham's razor by reducing three conditions (or four if expanded as sometimes proposed to counter Gettier) in the analysis of the concept of knowledge to just two; (d) we relieve ourselves of the requirement to seek truth in addition to or as something extra, a condition over and above the best justification of which we are capable; and (e) by strengthening the justification condition at the expense of the former truth condition, we avoid applications in which the justification required of knowledge is trivially satisfied.<sup>1</sup>

My favorite relevant literary reference in this connection appears in a passage from Jorge Luis Borges' 1970 fiction, *Broadie's Report*, when he recounts his experience of cognitively peculiar epistemic agents in the course of presumably imaginary travels: "The common people say they have the power to transform anyone they please into an ant or a tortoise; one individual who noted my incredulity at this report showed me an anthill, as though that were proof" (Borges, 1998: 405). The justification needed for knowledge is evidently something stronger than this; although, in the traditional analysis of knowledge all we are supposed to do is provide *some* kind of warrant or justification for whatever we believe ourselves to know.

I submit that advancing such reasons against truth as essential to knowledge is all within the legitimate practice of analytic theoretical philosophy. Moreover, I would say of my revisionary analysis that it is *true* that the concept of knowledge does not imply truth, and that it is *true* that truth as opposed to the best available justification is not needed for knowledge, that we can have knowledge without truth. If the direction of this effort to reconfigure the concept of knowledge has merit, then it shows that there is nothing in principle philosophically objectionable about solid work in epistemology that in some sense dispenses with truth as a condition if not as a goal of knowledge.

## Studying versus making philosophical history

Hintikka also disparages recent advances in the history of philosophy. He presents a list of objections made of late to some of the most important hallmarks of Frege's logic, philosophy of mathematics, and philosophy of language. He decries what he calls "the best payoff of being able to understand earlier philosophers' ideas [in order] to be able to diagnose their mistakes and to correct them."

I frankly do not agree with this part of Hintikka's argument at all. I think that there has been an understandable backlash against a thinker so lionized in the analytic tradition as Frege for so many years, who, in my view, has indeed left us with a legacy of inhibiting philosophical problems and misdirections, by which I mean to include Bertrand Russell's analysis of definite descriptions, the impression that we can adequately define the concept of number, and many other things besides, with all the harm to free thinking in logic and philosophical semantics that Frege's thought has inadvertently done.

Here is a dilemma. Either Frege made the highly influential mistakes on which recent Frege scholarship has focused, and of which Hintikka complains, or he did not. If Frege did *not* make the mistakes, then we should leap to his defense and set the record straight. But if he *did*, as I certainly believe, and my list of difficulties with Frege is even longer than the ones Hintikka mentions, then how as responsible historians of philosophy can we possibly pretend otherwise? If we are to combine accuracy of interpretation with philosophical commitment, while not running the two together, as Hintikka quite rightly recommends, then I do not understand how Hintikka can consistently scorn the efforts of historians and practicing logicians and philosophers to expose Frege's wrong turns.

Moreover, later in his exposition, Hintikka makes precisely the same kind of criticisms against Tarski. I happen to sympathize with much of what Hintikka says here against Tarski, and, once

again, I would go even further. But why is Tarski-bashing okay for Hintikka, but Frege-bashing not? Although I think that both Frege and Tarski have a lot to answer for philosophically, Frege more than Tarski in my view deserves at least some of the hostility he has lately received. It would obviously be a fatal mistake to allow our preoccupation with criticizing any philosopher to blind us to a thinker's positive achievements. But I cannot see any good reason for declaring open season on Tarski while keeping Frege in protective custody.

It is in connection with Tarski also that Hintikka similarly observes: "There are good reasons to cultivate awareness and appreciation of such paradoxes [as the liar and the heap]: they are important historically and they may also be the best way of introducing students into the problematic to which they belong. But the fact is that there exist definitive solutions to most of the traditional paradoxes, which means that the practice of presenting them as serious research topics is little short of ridiculous." And so it *would* be also in my opinion, *if*, what is not the case, the solutions themselves were more *unified*, solving large numbers of the paradoxes in one fell swoop, *or* if all the solutions that have been proposed up until now did not raise philosophical problems of their own. Yes, we can "solve" (in scare quotes) the paradoxes, the liar, for example, if we are willing to pay the philosophical price for doing so that any particular solution always demands. That the paradoxes continue to capture the philosophical imagination of new and seasoned logicians is powerful testimony to the fact that we cannot simply turn the page on that fascinating chapter in the history of logic and move on to new things. Hintikka's criticisms of Tarski serve already to show that he is unprepared to accept what many philosophers have previously thought had closed the book on the liar paradox by means of Tarski's "semantical" conception of truth.<sup>2</sup>

## Logical positivism as a model for philosophical crisis resolution

Hintikka, finally, seems to evince nostalgia for the days of logical positivism when philosophers had a common commitment to something like a research program and a methodology to be followed out in making philosophical progress. Hintikka thinks that the program in its essentials has not died, or need not do so, and I agree that the pendulum has probably swung too far in the opposite direction since logical positivism lost favor among the majority of philosophers.

Whatever good ideas the positivists had should undoubtedly be salvaged and put to use. As for a criterion of meaning at the heart of logical positivism by which aesthetic and ethical judgments are ham-fistedly either judged nonsensical or interpreted emotively in purely behavioral psychological terms, I myself would not like to see that day return. What is significant about the positivist experiment and its failure historically in my opinion is its efforts to clean house of nineteenth-century Post-Kantian excesses (the "Negation negates itself in the embrace of the eternal" kind of thing), and its demonstrated inability to sustain a combined analytic and empirical conception of literal meaningfulness. I am not enthusiastic about the prospects for a neo-positivism to take up the banner that the Wiener Kreis abandoned, the members of whom in their supreme individuality, as Hintikka undoubtedly knows better than I, refused to identify themselves as part of any unified movement, and most of whom strenuously resisted any such labels as "logical positivism" or "The Vienna Circle."

As for Hintikka's own solution to the "crisis" he identifies in contemporary theoretical philosophy, I shall say nothing of substance. I love what Hintikka is doing. I just do not want to do it myself. I have my own work to do, that issues from my own philosophical perspective. I do not feel an inclination to sign on to another philosopher's project in order to avoid a crisis in contemporary analytic philosophy that I do not agree in the first place actually exists. I think that Hintikka's research program represents an admirable approach to a number of otherwise not obviously interconnected philosophical questions, and that Hintikka is doing important



work pursuing these ideas. His work in philosophy is precisely in my judgment among the most promising signs that philosophy is *not* currently bogged down in any sort of methodological crisis. The tasks Hintikka describes are manifestly deserving of active development. I see Hintikka's research program, nevertheless, as just one strand in a complex braid of worthy contemporary philosophical projects, among so many other interesting agendas that are currently underway. I hope, as I do for many comparable competing contemporary endeavours, that it continues to prosper as a new metaphilosophical paradigm in its own right, without returning to anything resembling the ideologically and methodologically blinkered days of logical positivism.

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### Notes

1. I have aired this analysis of the concept of knowledge without truth in three recent presentations: "Justification and Truth Conditions in the Concept of Knowledge," Episteme Conference on "Justification Revisited," Université de Genève, Geneva, Switzerland, March 25–27, 2010; "Knowledge Without Truth," Philosophy Colloquium, Institut de philosophie, Faculté des lettres et sciences humaines, Université de Neuchâtel, Switzerland, November 16, 2010; "Against Epistemic Hypocrisy," Copenhagen-Lund Workshops in Social Epistemology, Copenhagen University, Copenhagen, Denmark, November 25, 2010.
2. I present and defend several different solutions to the liar paradox in Jacquette, 2000, 2007b, 2008, and 2010.

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