

Truth: A History and a Guide For the Perplexed

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Preface: This book is about the quest for language that can match reality. Suspicions that reality is intractable and inexpressible have always been around.

INTRODUCTION

Under the Owl – Truth, Time and History

Anything must be true before it can significantly claim other merits. Without Truth, all else is worthless. (E. Gellner, Postmodernism, Reason and Religion)

There is no social order without trust and no trust without truth, at least, without agreed truth-finding procedures.

Every use of language represents an attempt to reflect the real.

Naming is the simplest form of matching language to reality.

CHAPTER 1

The Hairy Ball – Teeth Optional The Truth You Feel

The nature of truth eludes us; we have no satisfactory definition at our disposal, no agreed or reliable truth-recognition technique; but we have some working assumptions about the reliability of our feelings, our senses, our powers of reason or the authority of our sources of counsel or of inspiration.

Societies like ours, in rapid states of transformation, sometimes need to retrieve lost or vanishing wisdom from their pasts, or borrow it from other peoples whose experience of development has been different.

When we speak of truth as eternal, we mean something other than the property of a sentence or proposition: we mean reality itself-the truth which must be eternal because falsehood or nothingness could not precede it; the absolute truth which, according to one of the most widely used textbooks of the history of philosophy, is the ultimate object of every search for truth.

If our common metaphorical language is anything to go by, the recognition mechanism most generally used is feeling. People rarely impose a more demanding test than that of their own emotional reaction.

Feeling is thought unformulated; though is feeling expressed in communicable ways.

Reassurance: the mental condition which corresponds to the displacement of anxiety.

“Is to find a unitary pattern in which the whole of experience is symmetrically ordered.

Monism really should be understood to mean that there is literally only one thing, in which all the seeming diversity of the cosmos is comprehended.

Zeno of Elea

Reality must be continuous since, if it were divisible, the units into which it split would be infinitely divisible themselves. According the second, motion is illusory because the arrow is at rest throughout its flight, since it is always occupying a space equal to its own size. The ‘dichotomy paradox’ asserts the impossibility of motion by showing that a journey can never be completed, since half the remaining distance has always to be crossed first.

“If a rod one foot in length is cut sort every day by one half of its length, it will still have something left after then thousand generations.”

Above all, we are urged to behold the sky. Though we can see only ‘a bright, shining patch’, the whole of it is inexhaustible and all-containing.

Monisom is one of those ancient ideas that have never stopped being modern. The oneness of everything and the equation, Infinity equals one, are borne out by possible constructions of elementary logic, everyday observation and modern science. Infinity is the sum total of everything. There cannot be more than one infinity.

When we identify a single object, we can think of it as an infinite number of fractions of itself.

Modern developments in scientific though and experiments on the connectedness of quantum phenomena by “superluminal” communication – apparently ‘faster’ than light and beyond the reach of local causation – have convinced practitioners of ‘new physics’ that the unity of the cosmos is demonstrable. A world has been revealed in which the parts are seen to be in immediate connection, in which their dynamical relationships depend, in an irreducible way, on the state of the whole system (and indeed on that of the broader systems in which they are contained, extending ultimately and in principle to the entire universe). Thus one is led to a new notion of unbroken wholeness which denies the classical idea of analysability of the world into separately and independently existent parts.

CHAPTER 2

The God in the Saddle: The Truth You Are Told

Man, proud, man,
Drest in a little brief authority,
Most ignorant of what he's most assured,
His glassy essence, like an angry ape,
Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven,
As make the angels weep.

Measure for Measure

There are therefore two serious problems with the theory that truths are innate. First, if they are innate, how do they get to be so?

Secondly, if they exist at all, are they not adequately described as instincts: drives, dispositions, and capacities – tendencies as natural, according to an image coined by Leibniz, as the veins in marble, which limit our minds' creativity?

CHAPTER 3

The Cage of Wild Birds: the Truth of Reason

Reason can kill. Buridan's ass perished of hunger because reason kept him poised midway between two equal haystacks, when an unreasoning impulse in favour of either would have saved him.

We keep returning to reason precisely because it occupies the middle place; it is the revisited point on the swing of the pendulum between scepticism and enthusiasm. When we distrust passion because it is too subjective, or reject authority because it has no input of our own, we flee to reason. When we abandon sense-perception as delusive and insight as imaginary, we curve back to the centre. As a way of telling truth from falsehood, reason combines apparently incompatible virtues: it relies on our own resources but can be subjected to an outside test. It can be checked by comparison with other's opinions or by reference to rules. It is subjectively satisfying but externally approved.

Thoughts are autonomous: they are not made by the mind but trapped by it, like wild birds taught to sing or chatter, and reason is the cage we forge to keep them under control.

Because reason – in admittedly varying degrees – is available to everybody, it has a potential advantage over the truth you feel and the truth you are told. It can proceed by persuasion from individual discovery to universal or general acceptance.

Reason does not mean merely having notions or concepts prior to experience: it means thinking them out for oneself; or it can involve starting with experience but then using 'pure' thought to enhance or explode its findings.

The agonies of a great mind imprisoned in the imperfections of human communication, like an orator frustrated by a defective megaphone. He realized that our discourse is limited to what we can think, and what we think is restricted by the range of names we can devise for it. Even objects outside thought would have to become thoughts before we could talk about them.

Aristotle also put a lot of faith in what logicians call the 'law of excluded middle'. 'There is nothing,' he said, 'between asserting and denying. This is an insight of flawless perfection and limited usefulness, for most assertions and denials are tentative, qualified or conditional.

He understood meaning as the interplay of 'sense', which is what you understand by a term when you hear or read it, and 'reference', which is the correspondence between a term and the reality it denotes.

CHAPTER 4

The Dream of the Butterfly: The Truth You Perceive through Your Senses

In most societies, only the outrageous power and monstrous egotism of a tyrant or an oppressive elite has been able to galvanize the effort and mobilize the resources to make monumental achievements possible.

CHAPTER 5

The Death of Conviction

The other conspicuous attempt to find a compromise between Kant's intuition and scientific reliance on the senses is usually called 'Gestalt theory' or isomorphism. Considered as philosophy – as a theory of knowledge – it has precedents in ancient debates reported in the works of Plato and Aristotle. Considered as psychology, it is an early twentieth-century doctrine. Its advocates imagine that objects impress the brain with 'traces' of their own shape. The tragic flaw of Gestalt psychology is that it is an attempt to rescue a scientific definition of knowledge but has no scientific basis of its own. It is a defence of empiricism which lacks empirical support.

Anything enjoyed is play.

In 1960, in one of the most influential works ever written by a philosopher about science. Thomas Kuhn argued that scientific revolutions were identifiable with what he called 'paradigm shifts': changing ways of looking at the world and new imagery or language in which to describe it. Kuhn always repudiated the inference that most people drew: that the findings of science depended not on the objective facts but on the perspective of the enquirer.

We cannot pin meaning down, because it arises from relationships which are always forming and re-forming and are never complete. Every reading is necessarily as much a misinterpretation as an interpretation.

To a philosopher seeking truth, the limitations of language seem like a tiresome obstacle. If natural language does not suffice to convey meaning precisely, it ought to be possible to construct an alternative language, such as the propositional calculus, free of ambiguities or cultural accretions – or a meta-language in which the limitations of language can be contemplated without self-reference. Language is inextricably entangled in trammels of ‘strange loopiness’.

Doubt can only exist where there is a question; a question only where there is an answer, and this only where something can be said.

Medieval philosophers who assumed ‘that words signified only themselves, not any independent reality, and statement referred only to their own terms’.

Traditionally, language has been presented according to the model of Genesis: god creates things, then names them. Language is a response to needs which arise from contacts with objects. But suppose it were the other way round? Suppose language precedes experience and we model the world to fit it? In practice there is no means of representing claimed truths outside language (except, of course, with the help of some other means of expression, like art or calculus, which becomes a language if we use it accordingly). The theory – or discovery – that the ‘deep’ or underlying structures of language are innate tends to support this inversion.

The thought that all our perceptions are imprisoned by language itself – not any particular language but the very practice of articulation – is disarming. It really does seem to make access to objective reality impossible – or at best, to make language itself the sole constituent of such reality.

CHAPTER 6

Life After Doubt

In the global village, by contrast, we need virtues of neighbourliness, which include tolerance, reticence and mutual respect. Our priority is the avoidance of conflict. Surely it is better to elude controversy than to suppress it? Truth threatens peace. Those who think they possess it tend to turn into victimizers of the rest, like all the other bullies convinced of the superiority of their own race or class or caste or blood or wisdom.

We need a positive response on behalf of truth – an aggressive or, at least, an inventive defence which addresses candidly the doubts of a world in denial.

Three more or less positive ways of confronting Protagoras are popular today. First, religious fundamentalists respond in panic by irrationally affirming beliefs most people

cannot share. Secondly, seekers of an escape route turn to oriental traditions; there they hope to find an understanding of truth invulnerable to criticisms which have arisen in western thought. Finally, professional philosophers use the traditional resources of their discipline, with effects which tend to make matters worse by gutting all the traditional strength out of the concepts of truth.

Fundamentalism means uncritical, literal acceptance of what are supposed to be the founding doctrines or documents of a tradition. It demands a closed mind and the suspension of rational faculties; it is attractive only to the desperate and the dim. The huge allegiances it commands are proof of the strength of the reaction against relativism.

‘Truth ought to imply something about reality,’ a famous modern philosopher diffidently says. Most non philosophers would expect the connection between truth and reality to be explicit, intimate and necessary.

As we have seen, confidence is common in the reality of another truth world beyond and, in some beliefs, instead of the one we perceive through our senses. In either tradition, people demand of truth that it describe or match or fit or in some way ‘correspond’ to this reality.

It has been a major project of modern philosophy to separate the truth question from the reality question by treating truth as a property of an expression rather than as a declaration of what is really there.

Three ways have been proposed of resuing truth from reativization without necessarily committing to belief in a truth world: Correspondence, coherence and consensus.

There search for truth is a collective enterprise, in which we learn from each other. As a truth finding strategy, this is objectionable on the grounds that it is vague and slow; as a political prescription, it can be criticized for endorsing woolly minded ‘community politics’. But it has merits which so far have been insufficiently praised: it is humane, undogmatic, solidly rooted in tradition, optimistic and, in effect, good for the individual who practises it and the society which benefits from it.

Memory of what previous generations have learned is the foundation of all possible progress. When traditions conflict, they need more care, not less: they should be keenly scrutinized, not casually discarded.

First, apprehension of the truth you feel is registered like an emotion and redeemed from subjectivism by its resemblance to instincts, such as alertness to danger, hunger and fear.

Secondly, the truth you are told represents a version of the world – which may be different from the one you feel in your gut to be true – imposed by consensus or imparted or enforced by authority.

Reason and sense perception, finally, have served so well that even their critics depend on them in practice.

Perceptions are perception of perceptions and so on ad infinitum; they never reach say their critics the realities which are the referents of truth.

It is surely imprudent to rely on reason and perceptions on their own, without taking instruction from the truth you feel and the truth you are told.

The search for truth is a struggle: part of a war against chaos, a strenuous ritual to wrest reality from doubt by naming its parts, or a spell to save it from being engulfed in nothingness.

Relativists are right in this: truth telling techniques – and, it is probably safe to say, the concepts of truth which underlie them – do change from time to time, place to place and person to person. Subjectivists are also right in this: individuals have no guarantee of the authenticity of assertions – only the liberty to assent.

Deconstructionists are right about the limitations of language; words form a web with a very loose mesh in which meaning is never quite trapped; the gap between terms and the realities they are meant to refer to seems to stretch beyond our power to span it.

The truth quest is always the same: the unwavering search for signs to match reality.

Adopt multiple perspectives, seeing the past from many different points of view closer to the events. For history is like a nymph glimpsed bathing between leaves: the more you shift perspective, the more is revealed. If you want to see her whole you have to dodge and slip between many different viewpoints. Even the most dedicated subjectivist should be able to imagine what it would be like: objectivity would be the result of compiling or combining all possible subjective points of view. Every time we take notice of each other, therefore, we get a little closer to truth. Those who refuse to acknowledge anyone's existence save their own must approach truth by imagining a variety of perspectives.

Reality, if there is any, is left out of our efforts to formulate thoughts and signal their content to each other. The only relations which structure our ideas and our attempts to communicate are between words (or other signs), not between words and other objects; language tells us about nothing except itself.

Words which relate to other words call a whole world into being.

Whenever we get an intimation of truth – whether we feel it, listen for it, sense it or think out for ourselves – we should expect it to talk to use and we should be able to try, if we like, to express it for others.