TRUTH

IDEAS IN PROFILE

SMALL INTRODUCTIONS TO BIG TOPICS

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Truth

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PREFACE

This is the third book under my name with the word 'truth' in the title, so perhaps some explanation is in order. The first was a collection of classic philosophical and logical writings that my erstwhile colleague Keith Simmons and I put together in 1999, as a title in the series of Oxford Readings in Philosophy. So, apart from my contribution to our joint introduction, it was by no means an exposition of my own views. The second I billed as a 'Guide for the Perplexed', and it wrestled above all with problems of scepticism and relativism, perhaps more prevalent in the carefree 'postmodern' world at the turn of the millennium than they are at present. It was easier then to think that anything goes, when nothing much in the way of war, religious intolerance and terrorism was going on, than it is now, when they are pervasive features of everyday life. In that book I took to task some philosophers, particularly Richard Rorty and Donald Davidson, who seemed to me to have come too close to a relativistic view of truth. But when fine philosophers go astray, there is usually some truth in the offing, and this book tries to do fuller justice to the pragmatist strain in each of those writers, and to others in the pragmatist tradition.

So the approach of this book is very different. It briefly lays out the classical approaches to understanding the notion of truth, but then devotes the second half of the book to some areas, such as aesthetics, religion, ethics and interpretive disciplines, where truth can seem especially

fugitive and endlessly contestable. The aim is to show that a better understanding of all our practices with the notion of truth arises if we take seriously the point of Jeremy Bentham's and C. S. Peirce's remarks (see epigraph on page 4). What this means has to unfold in due course, but when it does we gain not only a new perspective on the old problem of truth, but a new sense of the practices of philosophy itself. The selection of topics is necessarily partial, since philosophers have pursued issues of truth and our attempts to find it in more areas than I have space to talk about. Perceptual judgement, mathematical investigations, scientific truth, truth about possibilities and necessities, give rise to their own huge literatures. But in order to avoid superficial treatments of too many things I have instead tried to follow a particular thread, to see where it takes us in a limited number of especially contentious areas. I hope it will be evident how the thread can be extended further, and it will be an exercise for the reader to think about that. Philosophy, like gardening, needs to be practised to be understood, and although I hope to provide tips, suggestions and examples to follow, the point has to be to initiate a process, not to deliver a finished product. To whet people's appetites, I might say that this is also the moral I am deriving from Bentham and Peirce.

I have been indebted over the years to many colleagues, friends and writings. I would like particularly to mention Edward Craig, Allan Gibbard, Robert Kraut, Huw Price and Michael Williams, who have all influenced the way I think about these things. I owe a great deal to Chris Hookway's and Cheryl Misak's work on the American pragmatist

tradition. I owe the stimulus to think about truth in law to Andrew Stumff Morrison, and the fascinating, and to me new, material on Thomas Hobbes to Thomas Holden. I owe thanks to Catherine Clarke for encouragement, and to John Davey for his faith in the project.

Stretching his hand up to reach the stars, too often man forgets the flowers at his feet.

Jeremy Bentham[1]

We must not begin by talking of pure ideas – vagabond thoughts that tramp the public highways without any human habitation – but must begin with men and their conversation.

C. S. Peirce[2]

PART I

THE CLASSIC APPROACHES

There is an air of divinity that hangs over the concept of truth. Truth is the goal of enquiry, the aim of experiment, the standard signalling the difference between it being right to believe something, and wrong to do so. We must court it, for in its absence we are bewildered or lost or may even be facing the wrong way, on the wrong track altogether. Deception is an insult to this divinity, as well as an insult to its target. Sometimes, perhaps more often than we think, truth hides itself, and we have to put up with simplifications, models, idealisations, analogies, metaphors and even myths and fictions. These may be useful, but we think of them as only at best paving the way to the altar of truth. Sometimes we have to settle for mere opinion or guesswork, but the god of truth is better served by attendant deities, such as reason, justification and objectivity. Once we have it, truth radiates benefits such as knowledge and, perhaps most notably, success in coping with the world.

It is theology that tries, with doubtful success, to unravel the nature of other deities, but it is philosophy that wrestles with the nature of truth. How does it set about doing so?

1

CORRESPONDENCE

A good map corresponds with the landscape. If, in accordance with the mapping conventions, there is a symbol showing a road at some place, then there is a road there, if it shows a river, then there is a river, and so on. The conventions are not always obvious. We may not even know which bit of land the map is describing (think of pirates' treasure maps), and we may not know the conventions. A short red line does not look much like a road, and a thin blue line not much like a river, and some maps ignore conventions that others use. Famously, the distances shown between stations on the classic London Underground map do not correspond with the actual distances on the ground in a systematic way, whereas on most maps they do. Hence reading a map is a skill that needs teaching. But once the conventions are understood, a good map will correspond with what is found on the ground. A good portrait corresponds with a face even more readily, since a portrait can look significantly like a face – one might even mistake one for the other in a bad light – whereas a map does not generally look like a landscape. Both, of course, can go wrong. Bad maps or portraits do not correspond with their target in the way they should.

What kinds of thing are true? For the purposes of our investigation we shall put aside the sense in which a friend

might be true (i.e. loyal) or a ruler might be true (i.e. straight). We are concerned here only with the things that we assert or think. They are standardly conveyed by indicative sentences, which we use to claim that something *is* the case. We could say that it is the beliefs expressed by such sentences that are true, or perhaps the thoughts or assertions or judgements or propositions. Questions are not themselves true or false, although they may be answered truly or falsely. Nor are injunctions or commands, although they may be obeyed or disobeyed. If we think of thoughts as being true or false we should also notice that a thought might be entertained without being asserted. I might wonder whether someone eats meat, and then, discovering that he does, assert the very same thought about which I had been undecided. Unless it is asserted, a thought is not at fault for being false – we can while away time pleasurably enough entertaining thoughts that are not true – but an assertion or belief is supposed to be true, and at fault if it is not. So in what follows I shall talk about beliefs and assertions as the primary candidates for being true or not. A belief is said to be identified by its content, which is roughly the sum total of what makes it true or false.

Beliefs in this sense are public property. I can believe the same thing that you believe, and the possibility of communication depends upon that. Beliefs can also be held in common by people speaking different languages, although there can be difficulties of exact translation. To investigate truth I am going to put aside the question of whether there could be inexpressible beliefs, that is, that have no linguistic vehicle. People are often led to suppose that there are

because of the experience of being at a loss for words, of thinking that there is something to be said but not knowing what it is. However, when we are in that frustrating state, we are casting around for something to say, which is just the same as casting around for something to believe. In this state we do not at the same time know what to believe and yet not know what to say. Similarly, we may want to attribute thoughts or beliefs to animals, which have no means of linguistic expression. But when we do so, we ourselves can say what we think they believe: if on the basis of its avoidance behaviour we say that a chicken believes some grain to be poisonous, we have found words to say what we think it believes.

The first natural thing to say about true beliefs is that, like portraits or maps, they too should correspond with something. They should correspond with the facts – the way the world is. The view is standardly fathered onto Aristotle: 'To say of what is that it is, or of what is not that it is not, is true.' True statements tell it like it is; true beliefs get the facts right. The world bears them out.

Philosophers often say odd things, but nobody denies that true beliefs correspond with the facts: it goes without saying, a platitude that nobody doubts. What philosophers do doubt is whether this is a useful thing to say, or is more than a merely nominal or verbal equivalence. Anything deserving the name of a correspondence *theory* of truth must say more. It must add that the notion of corresponding to the facts is the key to understanding truth itself, and many philosophers have indeed doubted that. They fear that 'corresponds with the facts' is just an elaborate synonym for

'true', rather than a useful elucidation of the notion. The question is whether we have a good understanding of facts, as a category, and of correspondence as a relation that a belief or statement can bear to them. And philosophers do find difficulty with each of these.

Actually, this understates it. Many of the most influential philosophers of the last century or so have competed to express enough contempt for the idea that correspondence gives us a real *theory* of truth, or explanation of the notion. 'The idea of correspondence is not so much wrong as empty', said Donald Davidson.[3] 'The intuition that truth is correspondence should be extirpated rather than explicated,' said Richard Rorty, echoing Peter Strawson's 'the correspondence theory requires not purification, but elimination.'[4] Other giants such as Nelson Goodman, Willard Van Orman Quine, Hilary Putnam and Jürgen Habermas all said similar things.

In order to appreciate these onslaughts, consider facts first. Many people become a little nervous with some categories of fact. People often wonder whether there are ethical facts (given intractable ethical disagreements) or whether there are aesthetic facts (given stubborn differences of taste and preference). These are areas in which the facts seem at best elusive, and possibly non-existent. By contrast we might think of good, concrete facts as ones that fall under our observation: the fact that there is a computer in front of me as I write, or that I am wearing shoes, for instance. But then there is the fact that there is not a lion in front of me (a negative fact) or the fact that if I attempt to walk in some directions I shall bump into a wall (a conditional or

hypothetical fact). Do I come across these facts, in the same way that I come across the computer and the shoes? I am sure of them, there is no doubt about that. But my confidence is not given by what I see so much as what I do not see, or bump into. It is an *interpretation* of my situation. But to interpret a situation is just to have a *belief* about it. Now, however, it seems that to come upon a fact, such as there not being a lion in front of me, is close to the same thing as believing that there is not a lion in front of me. And the fact then loses its status as an independent entity to which the belief must correspond. We can compare the map and the landscape, or the portrait with the sitter: here is the one, and here is the other. But we can't compare the fact and our belief, if to hold there to be a fact that such-and-such is just the same as to believe that such-and-such. 'If we can know fact only through the medium of our own ideas, the original forever eludes us.'[5]

It is as if in our mind the fact coalesces into the belief. It is no accident that facts are identified by the very same indicative sentences as beliefs: this is the logic we have given them. It is not a gift of the world, an independent 'thing' alongside the computer and the shoes that our minds are fortunately able to mirror. It is we who say things, and as we do so we use the same sentences to identify both our beliefs and what we hope to be the facts.

Of course, we can (and must) insist that the fact about the room, that there is no lion in it, is one thing, and the fact about me, that I believe this, is a different thing. They are independent: the room might have been lion-free although I had no opinion about whether it was, and I

might unfortunately have believed it to be lion-free when it was not. An investigation of the contents of the room is a different thing from an investigation of the contents of my beliefs about it. But this is just to say that the one judgement, that the room is lion-free, is not the other, the judgement that I, Simon Blackburn, believe it to be so. The judgement about the room is not a judgement about people, and my judgement about the room is not a judgement about myself. Granted, but this does not imply that either type of judgement is essentially relational or comparative, fitting a belief into something of the same shape, as it were.

We can come at the same difficulty in a different way, by means of another example. Nearly everybody knows their mother's name. So fix the belief in your mind that your mother's name is such-and-such. Now go through a process of firstly attending to that belief, and secondly attending to the fact that your mother's name is such-and-such, and thirdly comparing the two. I suspect you will find yourself bewildered. The belief does not present itself to your consciousness as a 'thing' or presence. You believe it, sure enough, but that is not an acquaintance with a mental thing or structure. It's more like a disposition. You are disposed simply to answer the question, what was your mother's name, by giving her name. You can probably do that without thought or doubt: the name simply springs to mind. And the fact that your mother's name is such-and-such does not hover into view either, as a kind of ghostly doppelganger to your belief. So believing something (which is the same as believing it to be true) is not a tripartite process of fixing A in your mind, then B, and then comparing the two to see if

they correspond. Yet the idea of correspondence seems to require that this is what it should be.

Another way to become uneasy about facts as a category to which thoughts or beliefs can correspond is to reflect on the difference between facts and objects, or even structures of objects. Wittgenstein asked us to consider the difference between the Eiffel Tower, a large, structured object which reflects light and weighs so many tons, and a fact about it, such as the fact that it is in Paris. He pointed out that while it would be possible to move the Eiffel Tower to Berlin, you cannot move the fact that the Eiffel Tower is in Paris anywhere. Unlike a thing, a fact has no location, and no chance of moving. A fact is not a locatable structure. In a similar vein the German logician Gottlob Frege had said 'that the sun has risen is not an object that emits rays that reach my eyes, it is not a visible thing like the sun itself.'[6]

It might seem to be so because there are certainly processes that we call 'being confronted with the facts'. If I blandly assert that there are no potatoes in the cupboard, my wife can confront me with the fact that there are. The process is one of checking beliefs, enquiring into their truth, and well-directed observation is a royal road to doing that. Similarly, if you find yourself worried that you may have got your mother's name wrong, you could in principle mount an enquiry. You could look at (what you take to be) old letters she signed, or court records, or birth certificates. You may even be able to ask her. Such processes can, and often should, confirm or disconfirm your belief. They might lay your doubts to rest. They will do so, of course, insofar as you take them to be what they seem to be. But that in

turn is a matter of having beliefs about them. The piece of paper is useless unless you take it to be one of her letters, and the court record is useless if you suppose it to refer to someone else. The person's avowal of her name is useless if you are unsure whether it is your mother who is speaking, or whether you think she has dementia. Interpretation and belief is always required, even as we check up on what we might take to be a simple matter of fact. What look to be potatoes in the cupboard may be no such thing, just fakes or fools' potatoes (and that too can be checked).

Perhaps the best stab at an uninterpreted confrontation with fact comes if we think of bare experience, or pure sensation. A squeak, a whiff or a glimpse can certainly engender belief: that mice have got into the kitchen, that Rover has been rolling in the mud, or that there are potatoes in the cupboard. The interpretation may be obvious and automatic. But it is still required to get from sensation to belief: to the unadapted mind the squeak or whiff or glimpse would suggest nothing at all. The association between that kind of glimpse and potatoes is all too familiar. But it is still required. Sensations cannot, by themselves, point beyond themselves. William James put the true situation memorably:

> A sensation is rather like a client who has given his case to a lawyer and then has passively to listen in the courtroom to whatever account of his affairs, pleasant or unpleasant, the lawyer finds it most expedient to give.[7]

In the philosophy of mind it is controversial whether there are such things as uninterpreted sensations at all, or

whether all sensation carries interpretation with it. In either case, as far as truth goes it is only with the interpretation that we even get a candidate for truth. Otherwise the sensation remains dumb, a passing experience of which we may make nothing. As James elsewhere put it, 'new experiences simply *come* and *are*. Truth is what we say about them.'[8] As an aside, it is one of the many ironies in the history of philosophy that in spite of such dicta James was frequently (and with some justice) accused of supposing that, given that they are subjectively useful, the consolations, yearnings or ecstatic experiences claimed by religious persons were themselves a kind of truth, ignoring the point that it is only interpretations of them in divine terms that could be true or false. But such claims, framed in terms of supernatural agency or expectations for the future, are then themselves subject to public scrutiny and criticism.[9] We shall hear more about James later, discussing pragmatism's theory of truth.

Although I think the strongest objection to the correspondence theory of truth is that it is vacuous or empty, this does not exhaust the arguments that have been raised against it. Some say that far from being empty it is pernicious, insinuating a false picture of the way the mind relates to the world. It sees us, it might be thought, as passive recipients doing no more than mirroring a self-interpreting or ready-made world, rather than responsible, active investigators, authors of our own categories and our own interpretations of things. Some say that it implies a 'metaphysical realism' according to which there is just one true, complete, book of the world, and it is our job to read it. Others say that it makes the world a Kantian 'thing in itself', lying

unknowably beyond the categories that our minds shape in order to deal with it, and so opens the door to a complete and unanswerable scepticism. It would be a long business to work out what justice, if any, there is in these complaints. One thing, however is clear enough, which is that a correspondence theory of truth cannot be charged both with being entirely empty and with being horribly misleading. You can mount one charge or the other but not both. If it is vacuous, then it can't be dangerous. Similarly, if it is vacuous it cannot best apply to some kinds of judgement, such as common-sense remarks about the environment, and not to others, such as ethical or aesthetic judgements.