

PHILOSOPHY AND THE CRISIS OF TRUTH

Patterns of Crisis. I would like to begin with a review of the forces opposed to the meaningful reception of truth in today's world. By meaningful truth I mean truth which has relevance for the whole person and not just some small corner of the brain. Nearly everyone believes that we all have a need for truth, but there is no agreement as to why this is so, or about the kinds of truth that are necessary. The answer I indicate will then be supported by some thoughts about the nature of truth as it must be in itself.

The present-day crisis of truth is to a large extent a result of a large-scale pursuit of truth over recent centuries, but one which was based on a belief that all truths are of equal value. For the sciences in particular, the number of known facts has been increased enormously, and if truth was a kind of currency, its present condition would be one of hyper-inflation. One can see the contrast between this and the Medieval idea of truth, for which truths about spiritual things always outweighed truths about nature. Nevertheless, the present crisis is solely a matter of the relation of human minds to truth, and not a crisis of truth itself; if truth *could* cease to exist, it would still be true that truth had ceased to exist.

The downgrading of our idea of truth can be seen in the way the distinction between fiction and non-fiction has become more and more eroded. This is part of a general merging of different categories, with a resulting confusion and disorder. At the same time, the popularization of psychology has focused most minds on the irrational or pathological reasons people could have for expressing their ideas. Gone are the days when everyone was credited with making an honest attempt to get at the truth. Now things are all too often said merely for the

sake of the effects they can have on other people, which could be called the "weaponization" of language. This goes with a general scepticism about reason and rationality themselves which leaves one with no arguments but those of rhetoric and personal abuse.

This goes on in a culture where the Theory of Evolution is the cornerstone of materialistic ideas of what we are and where we come from. Those who accept it may not see that, if true, all truth and intelligence would have to come from human brains, so that truth could be whatever the prevailing physical conditions made of it.

I'll just quote from a scientific account of what goes on in brains: "cells are constantly renewing themselves. For brain cells - where their shape and synaptic structures determine their function - the issue is all the more acute. The protein filaments that give the cells their internal shape have a half-life of just a few minutes. And the receptor proteins that stud the synapses need replacing every few days. The brain you have this week is not the one you had last week." Such is the material source of truth.

The effect of all this can only weaken and relativize one's idea of truth. The issue involved is an ancient one, and it was known to Plato, who was well aware of what we would call the choice between creation and evolution, saying: "is it not exclusively to divine craftsmanship that we must attribute coming into being from not-being? Or are we to adopt another and more commonly held theory - that nature brings things forth as a result of some spontaneous cause that generates without intelligence?" Plato's own choice is the theory that:

"things arise from a cause which, employing reason and art, is

is divine and proceeds from divinity. . ." (*Sophist* 265c).

This is not asking too much, because evolution attacks the basic precondition for truth, namely, *that the knower and the known must be equally parts of the same intelligent design*. There is no possibility that one accident could ever explain another one.

During the 20th Century, the attack on truth as an objective reality became more explicit, in the form of Linguistic Philosophy and Postmodernism. In either case, they connect words with other words, rather than the objects they naturally refer to, even though this subverts their own argument. This reveals the self-destructive tendency implicit in all naturalistic systems: they irrationally exempt themselves from the reductionist critique they apply everywhere else. For example, the claim that all intellectual activities are only "language games", and therefore unable to be true or untrue, if applied to Linguistic Philosophy itself, would mean we had a right to ignore it as a mere game, but if it claimed a substantive role, it must contradict itself. To the general public, this kind of thinking only looks as though verbal dishonesty is being allowed by the experts, for whom words are independent realities which do not have to connect with anything else.

The marginalisation of truth in some modern philosophies is made explicit in the first line of one of them: "The world is everything that is the case," where the word "true" is replaced by a phrase which evades the question of consciousness implicit in the idea of truth. "The case" or even "that which is" identifies truth with its static content, which, by itself, turns out to be mere clutter, as I shall try

to show later. Such thinking has influence because there is a public for which the exclusion of truth is *good news*. To have a love of truth is not natural, because it is a part of moral virtue; truth draws the self to the not-self, or the ever-changing to the unchanging. Conversely, the way of nature is always self-to-self or the changing-to-the-changing, a constant flow of subjectivity like that of Plato's "tyrannical man."

According to naturalistic thinking, everything one thinks or feels or utters is caused by one's age-group, social class, sex, race and education. Here again, its adherents are undeterred by the fact that it too self-destructs, in the same way as in the previous example. Lastly, there is what I would call "neo-Copernicanism" – a belief that it is the mark of a deep new insight into any subject that it should overturn all that was thought about it previously. This too can only weaken the sense of truth, because one cannot escape the suspicion that this prized new insight will itself be overturned all too soon. Thus truth becomes a perishable commodity.

[All these ways in which one's grasp of truth is weakened are accompanied by the rise of a historically new class of person, one in whom there is a higher than average intelligence and an absence of common sense. This highlights the fact that rational intelligence and common sense are not parts of the same faculty. Common sense is in fact an extension of the intellectual faculty into things of common interest, which shows that modernity favours the rational faculty against the intellectual one.]

Answering the Crisis. Today's obscuration of truth is not historically unprecedented, however, because it also existed in the 5th.Century B.C. when intellectual life in Athens was dominated by Sophists or self-appointed experts who claimed to

have the truth and to be able to teach virtue. They were respected and admired by many, but not by Socrates, who realized that they did not know very much at all. That does not mean that they were telling lies, if only because one must first know the truth in order to be able to tell lies about it, but they only wanted to teach things that would be popularly taken for truth; what was true or false *in itself* was an issue which did not interest them. Their stock in trade was therefore opinion and not knowledge, and few people bothered about the difference between them.

Not surprisingly, therefore, a majority of Athenians did not know how to distinguish Socrates from the sophists he had disputed against. His critique was aimed at determining the truth by isolating the essences of things, and thus Platonism was born of an attempt to put truth on a secure basis, safe from pretenders who preferred appearance to reality. Therefore, if anyone should ask "What is Platonism?" or "What is it about?" the answer must be: "Theory of knowledge." All the metaphysical developments of the Theory of Forms arose from the need to make statements which could be known to be true, and to define the conditions under which this could be done. When one spoke of Justice, for example, differing views of justice were taken to be so many subjective responses to an objective transcendental reality, i.e. Justice Itself, and so on with the other major realities. The recognition of such a Form requires that we think beyond such subjective images and connect mentally with the thing itself.

That the Forms should be both self-subsistent and transcendental, as well as serving our minds in the guise of concepts, makes the subject too metaphysical for many people, but in fact these properties are necessary if we are to be sure of finding the truth. It is necessary that the

objects of truth be separate from everything subject to personal interests and subjective impressions, in the way that words all too often are. (A.E.Taylor, *Plato*). This is what we expect of mathematical data, but now the same criteria are applied to everything else as well. This theory also requires that each soul should have the full range of the Forms in its own psychical make-up. For this reason, Plotinus says that we are each an intelligible world. (Enn.III,4,3, & V,5,9) Having these realities within us and prior to experience, then, we can learn to recognise them where they are instantiated in the outside world.

However, true statements are not simply collections of Forms, but according to Plato all true statements or *logoi* require an interweaving or *symploke* of Forms. Thus the statement that "a true statement or logos is an interweaving of Forms" must itself then interweave the Forms of "truth", "logos", "interweaving," and "Form." Plato rejects the possibility that all Forms can be combined with any of the others, just as he denies that none of them can combine with any others. We must learn which Forms combine with which and how, and under what conditions. Where true statements refer to changing things, the interwoven Forms have only short-lived instantiations. (*Sophist*, 251-259).

Criteria for Knowledge. Whether one is a Platonist or not, however, the need to distinguish truth or knowledge from belief or opinion remains, despite those who ignore the difference between them, and those who equate truth with something called "justified true belief." The tests we can apply here are not far to seek: we can easily share and exchange our beliefs, because belief only requires us to hold an image of a reality, whereas items of knowledge cannot be so

shared, unless both parties can first share the reasoning involved. Besides, one may cease to believe something and still remember it, but one cannot cease to know something without forgetting it.

Known truth requires an ascent through images to a cognitive transcendence, and thus to a full objectivity. This direct contact of mind with reality is what has been defined in the Middle Ages as *adaequatio rei et intellectus* or the "adequation" of mind with its object, which implies a realised act of identity between them. The mind thus becomes what it knows, not substantially, but in terms of attributes. (There is a Greek equivalent of this, attributed to Empedocles). This takes us a long way from Empiricism, because the Platonic theory of knowledge defies common sense notions like that of the priority of particulars, which notions are nearly always more or less materialistic. Nevertheless, the price of having real and absolute objects of knowledge is to have universals which are more real than the instantiations in which we perceive their presence. We are not able to recognise particular examples without first having in mind the universals which inform our sense experience.

The priority of Forms or universals is a reflection of their objective reality for Platonists, whereas other philosophies want to relativise them, and make them reflect only the working of the human mind. But truth itself is unchanging, and that puts it outside all nature's constant changes, including our reason; thus truth is above our reason. Platonic thought aims at truth for its own sake, unlike the way in which most people only want to know truths concerning their personal interests. When questions of absolute truth or untruth are in abeyance,

the default position is a natural preference for subjective experience, where feelings and images flow without reference to any other kind of being than their own, and where psychical activity is taken to be the whole of reality.

What is Truth? At this stage, we still need to know more about what truth is, and to decide where truth resides. It has been claimed that truth is "that which is," so that truth and being would be one and the same, in which case, the word "truth" would add nothing to the word "being." In one place Aristotle gives it the definition that: "that which is, is, and that that which is not, is not". Thus truths would be arrangements of things in a reality external to us, which in themselves would be just clutter; nevertheless, the truth must also be present in the minds that know it. There is a dilemma here which gives rise to four options: 1. That truth resides in the being of things called "true;" 2. That it resides in the human mind; 3. That it resides in both human minds and in things; 4. That it resides in minds and things in a unique manner in each.

Option 1 (objects alone) is possible only for philosophies like Linguistic Philosophy, which deny first-person consciousness; 2 (minds alone) is an improvement, but it comes too close to the idea that minds can actually create truth, whereas philosophy must comprehend all reality, and go beyond the psychological; 3 (objects and minds) would appear to be more realistic, comprehending all the mind's objects and all minds with them, but this would make "true" into another word for "everything." Truth in this case should be as common as dirt, with no need for us to hunt for it.

In option 4, truth would have to be in both the intellect *and* its objects rather as a chemical element may exist in both animate and in inanimate bodies, but in this case, its two presences would be independent of each other. It is better to compare truth with visibility. The sun, and other sources of light are visible objects, along with all the things they illuminate, but visibility exists in the sun in a primary and independent manner, and in illumined things in a dependent manner. This model would best exemplify the ways in which truth is in both the intellect and in the objects and ideas known to it.

This act of identification or *adaequatio* between the intellect and intelligible realities has links with the immortality of the soul and the Platonic Eros, although the transcendence and immortality of the ideas known does not appear to be the same as that of the knower, but the reason why the intellectual faculty is on a par with its intelligibles appears firstly in the adequation or community between them, and besides that, we find that at the highest level of reflection, the knower and the known are convertible, as can be seen in Proclus' *Elements of Theology*, prop.167, where he expresses this as follows: "There is an intelligible in the Intelligence and an intelligence in the Intelligible." In the words of Coleridge, this means "a perpetual self-duplication of one and the same power into object and subject, which presuppose each other, and can exist only as antitheses." (*Biographia Literaria*, Ch.XII, Thesis vi).

Thus the intellectual function must be included among the transcendental objects known to it, given the Platonic idea of the Forms as transcendent. This role of truth, as a practice

in life, has been traditionally taken in a dualistic manner which brings about the daily renewal of the inner man, and which takes place even while the outer and visible self is deteriorating and going downhill, so to speak. This idea can be modified on the basis that this work of truth is vitalising for the soul's intellectual faculty, and from thence it becomes so for the soul itself. But the soul is in any case the vitalising principle of the body, from whence it follows that what supports the life of the soul must indirectly support even that of the body, as far as it can respond to that.

These traditional conceptions of truth and the assimilation of it ought to be a sufficient answer to a criticism of philosophy in general, that it has no spiritual force and so cannot raise anyone's level of being. If it is objected that the pursuit of truth is just a peripheral activity for a small minority, it must be said that the state of seeking-to-know is essential to the human condition itself, and that the only issue is whether this passion is to be satisfied on a trivial and aimless level, or on a level where the known raises the knower to the source of his being. This is why the pursuit of truth is in reality a spiritual option for everyone, a non-egoistic activity available for most people most of the time, (ref. J.Needleman, *The Heart of Philosophy*) regardless of how much time they can give to it, and yet most people ignore it: - do they all have something more important to do?

Sources

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