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Starred (*) technical sections optional

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

INQUIRY, IT IS SAID, aims at the truth. Yet it's doubtful there is any such thing as *the* truth. So it might be better to say that inquiry aims at truth*s*, and better still to say that different inquiries from archeology to zoology aim at different truths from archeological to zoological. Such inquiries have had many successes, but in many cases inquiries are still underway, and success has not yet been achieved. Thus some truths are known, others unknown. But what, if anything, do the different truths, known and unknown, about different topics have in common, to make them all truths? If we knew the answer to this question we'd at least have a better understanding of the nature of inquiry, and perhaps even a better chance of finding what we're looking for when we inquire. But with so many kinds of truths, the project of coming up with a unified conception of what truths are might seem hopeless. Perhaps that is why other inquiries leave it to philosophy.

This little book is about recent philosophical inquiries into what it is for a thing to be true. There are other philosophical questions about truth—Is truth of value in itself or only as a means to other ends? How much sense can be made of the idea of one untruth's being closer to truth than another?—but there are so many such questions that it would take a book longer than this even just to introduce them all. The question on which we focus—"What is it for a thing to be true?"—has a certain priority simply because some sort of answer to it has to be presupposed by any serious attempt to answer almost any of the others.

Chapter One

1.1 TRADITIONAL THEORIES

If the best-known saying about truth is Pilate's question, "What is truth?" (John 18:38), probably the best-known saying about truth *by a philosopher* is Aristotle's assertion (*Metaphysics*, 1011b25):

(1)   *To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true.*

This saying, like others of Aristotle's, has been interpreted in more than one way; and it is not the only thing Aristotle said about truth, either. The definition modern philosophy inherited from medieval Aristotelianism ran along the following lines:

(2)   *Truth is agreement of thought with its object.*

Most early modern philosophers from Descartes to Kant professed to accept something like (2) as a definition of truth.

Some, however, even as they did so, complained, in a terminology itself inherited from medieval Aristotelianism, that (2) was only a "nominal" definition, revealing the meaning of the *word* "truth," and not a "real" definition, revealing the essence of the *thing*, Truth. The supposed contrast between real and nominal definition was in deep disrepute through much of the last century, but in recent decades its reputation has recovered somewhat, and we will see in later chapters that there is a fundamental division today among writers on truth over the question whether, once it has been explained what it *means* to *call* something true, there remain any further questions about what it *is* to *be* true.

Be that as it may, (2) was as diversely interpreted as it was widely endorsed. By a century or so ago at least three interpretations had emerged, differing over the location of the objects of thought—in an external world, in the mind along with thought itself, or in the interaction between the two—and therewith over the nature of agreement. In surveys of philosophical thought about truth one typically encounters early on a list of "theories" of truth represented by slogans loosely based on things that were said in a three-cornered debate over truth about a century ago, in which the realist insurgent Bertrand Russell attacked the

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dominant British idealism and American pragmatism of the day, as represented by the now-forgotten H. H. Joachim and the ever-famous William James.

The slogans are *biconditional* in form, involving "if and only if" (henceforth abbreviated "iff"). They read as follows:

(3)   Realist or correspondence theory:
A belief is true iff it corresponds to reality.

(4)   Idealist or coherence theory:
A belief is true iff it coheres with other ideas.

(5)   Pragmatist or utility theory:
A belief is true iff it is useful in practice.

By bringing in the notions of *reality* and *idea* and *practice*, whose homes are metaphysics and epistemology and ethics, such views tend to suggest truth is a metaphysical or epistemological or ethical notion.

Both (4) and (5) invite immediate objections: May not a paranoid's delusions of persecution be frighteningly coherent? May not a patient's faith that a mere placebo is a wonder drug be therapeutically useful? Russell was quick to claim in opposition to Joachim that multiple systems of beliefs may be internally consistent, though incompatible with each other. Nietzsche had already suggested well before James that false beliefs may be not merely useful but indispensable for life. These objections are so obvious that the reader will likely guess that Joachim and James must have held more interesting views than a simplistic reading of the coherence and utility slogans would suggest.

Indeed, idealists understood that multiple belief systems, including crazy ones, might be classifiable as coherent if one meant by coherence just bare logical consistency; but they meant something more. Likewise, pragmatists recognized that there might be counterexamples to the principle of the utility of truth if one understood it as a purported exceptionless universal law; but they understood it as something less. Both groups also made cogent criticisms of crude "copy" versions of the correspondence theory. And the coherence and utility views put two questions on the agenda for any inquiry into the nature of truth: to explain why

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consistency is at least a *necessary* condition for truth, and why, as a general rule subject to particular exceptions, true beliefs *tend* to be more useful than false ones.

Still, Joachim leaves quite obscure what beyond mere consistency is required for a system of beliefs to constitute a "significant whole," and thus be coherent in his sense; and James does not satisfactorily explain how utility, or any feature that only claimed to hold "in the long run and for the most part," could be *definitive* of truth.

1.2 Contemporary Theories

Any historical treatment of our subject would have a great deal more to say about the figures already mentioned and several others. Gottlob Frege, the great precursor of the analytic tradition in philosophy, held that truth could not be defined as correspondence or in any other way. G. E. Moore, cofounder with Russell of that tradition, held like Russell that truth is correspondence, and unlike Russell that correspondence is unanalyzable. C. S. Peirce, the philosopher and logician from whom James took the word "pragmatism," defined truth roughly as what would come to be believed if inquiry were pursued to its ideal limit; John Dewey, a younger pragmatist whom James frequently cited, eventually concluded that one should simply *avoid* talk of truth in favor of talk of "warranted assertability."

This book, however, in accordance with the aims of the series in which it appears, must be concerned mainly with the status of the question among philosophers in the analytic tradition in the early twenty-first century, and so, after taking note of the debates of the first years of the twentieth, must leave those earlier debates behind. Henceforth the coherence and utility theories will be mentioned only as occasional foils for views having a significant number of present-day defenders.

But note the plural: "view*s* having a significant number of present-day defenders." The analytic tradition has become the mainstream in Anglophone philosophy, wholly supplanting idealism and largely absorbing pragmatism, but in achieving this

status it has ceased to represent, if it ever did, a uniform doctrine. Its founders' realist or correspondence view of truth is by no means universally accepted, and the reader should not infer from our indication that (4) and (5) are no longer widely defended that there is now a consensus in favor of (3). The problem with (3) is not that what it tells us seems obviously wrong, as with (4) or (5), but rather that it tells us so very little, pending specification of what its key terms ("reality" and "correspondence") are supposed to mean, and that every attempt to say something more specific has proved highly contentious.

The rival theories that attract philosophers today are not, however, those that attracted philosophers a century ago. Today the kind of idealism that predominated a century ago is dead, its heir being an idealism that dares not speak its name, and calls itself "antirealism." Antirealism holds a distinctive view of the nature of truth, but it resembles the traditional idealist Joachim's view less than it resembles Peirce's. Pragmatism survives, but some of its most noted recent adherents have been, like many nonpragmatists, attracted to a view of the nature of truth, called *deflationism*, that attributes no interesting common property to all truths. In this respect deflationism is unlike the view of James; it derives, rather, from F. P. Ramsey, the most talented British philosopher of the generation after Russell and Moore.

So in place of the traditional three-cornered realist-idealist-pragmatist debate, one has today a three-cornered realist-antirealist-deflationist debate, complicated by each of the three positions coming in several variant versions and by the presence also of several less popular views on the scene. That debate will be the primary topic of this book.

1.3   PARADOXES

Russell's work in logic became very influential among philosophers in the decades following the First World War, especially among the logical positivists, the dominant school of the period. But many positivists' views on truth were less like Russell's than like Dewey's, in that they tended to hold that the concept of truth

has no role to play in a scientifically oriented philosophy. Ironically, one of Russell's own discoveries contributed to the spread of this tendency, which was also found among logicians and mathematicians.

In the background was a crisis in the then-novel branch of mathematics known as set theory, where antinomies or paradoxes had emerged. Some of these (Burali-Forti's, Cantor's) were quite technical, but Russell discovered one that is easily stated. Consider the set *R* of all sets that are not elements of themselves. Then *R* is an element of *R*, which is to say, is one of the sets that is not an element of itself, iff *R* is not an element of *R*—a contradiction! Russell's paradox reminded many of a fact long known but little cited in the realist-idealist-pragmatist debate, that the notion of truth, too, is subject to paradoxes.

In particular it reminded many of a paradox attributed to Aristotle's contemporary Eubulides, called the *pseudomenos* or *liar*. Suppose I say, "What I am now saying is not true." Then it seems that what I am saying is true iff what I am saying is *not* true—another contradiction! Medieval logicians had added similar examples, under the label *insolubles*: Suppose Socrates says, "What Plato is saying is true," while Plato says, "What Socrates is saying is false." Modern mathematicians and logicians and philosophers now added more examples, finding that truth is but one of a family of related notions, *all* of which involve what seem to be similar contradictions.

One member of this family of notions—called *alethic*, from the Greek for "truth"—is that of a predicate or an adjective being true *of* something. This notion gives rise to an exact parallel to Russell's paradox of the set of all sets that are not elements of themselves, namely, Grelling's paradox of the adjective that is true of all adjectives that are not true of themselves. "English" is English, "short" is short, and "polysyllabic" is polysyllabic. Hence these three are *autological* or true of themselves. By contrast, "French" is not French, "long" is not long, and "monosyllabic" is not monosyllabic. So these three are *heterological*, or not true of themselves. What about "heterological"?

Another member of the family of alethic notions is that of *definability*, where an object is definable iff it is the one and only

thing of which some predicate is true. This notion likewise gives rise to several paradoxes, of which Berry's, the easiest to state, goes somewhat as follows: "The smallest natural number not definable in English in twenty-six syllables or fewer" defines a natural number in English in twenty-six syllables. Other definability paradoxes (Richard's, König's) were more technical, and became entangled with debates over the status of set theory. Many mathematicians were only too happy to join those philosophers who classed alethic notions as unacceptably "psychological" if not damnably "metaphysical" in character.

However, one important mathematician and logician, Alfred Tarski, and following him quite a few philosophers, attempted to rehabilitate the notion of truth by "solving" or "resolving" or "dissolving" or at least *blocking* the paradoxes. Debate over the solution (or insolubility) of the paradoxes and debate over the nature (or lack of nature) of truth proceeded separately over most of the last century, but it has become increasingly clear in recent years that the two questions cannot really be kept apart. (For instance, some think deflationism makes it harder, while others think it makes it easier, to deal with the paradoxes.) Accordingly, the paradoxes will be a secondary topic of this book.

1.4 Plan

It is with Tarski, probably still today the writer most often cited in discussions of truth by philosophers in the analytic tradition, that we begin our survey of theories of truth. To accommodate readers differing in their degree of background and interest in technical matters, we divide our account of Tarski's work in two. The first half of chapter 2 gives a nontechnical account of the most often discussed aspects of Tarski's views, which should be enough to enable the reader to follow allusions to those views later in the book. More technical material is confined to the starred sections making up the second half of the chapter, which readers who so choose may postpone or omit.

We then turn to the deflationism-realism-antirealism debates, taking deflationism first. Tarski gave a central role in the theory of

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truth to the principle that saying something and saying it is true are equivalent. Common to all forms of deflationism is the claim that, roughly speaking, this equivalence principle is *all* there is to the theory of truth. Chapter 3 is devoted to the exposition of various deflationistic positions from Ramsey's time to the present; a half-dozen variants, some more radical, some more moderate, are described. The present authors are sympathetic to the general idea behind deflationism, but not fully satisfied with any of the existing versions. It is our dissatisfaction with existing versions that will be most evident in this chapter, while our sympathy with the general idea will become more evident when we turn in later chapters to deflationism's "inflationist" (realist and antirealist) rivals and critics.

One popular objection to the equivalence principle, and hence to any theory of truth, such as deflationism, that embraces it, goes as follows. If you have never practiced cannibalism, then neither "Yes" nor "No" is an appropriate answer to "Have you stopped eating people?" since the question seems to presuppose that you at least *used to* eat people. This suggests that "You have stopped eating people" is neither true nor false. But if it is *not* true (as well as not false), then to say that it *is* true is to say of what is not that it is, which is false, and we have a case where saying something is not equivalent to saying that it is true, because the latter is false while the former is *not* false (though not true, either). Similar purported counterexamples turn on the phenomena of vagueness and relativity, which we lump together with presupposition in chapter 4 under the bland label "indeterminacy." We survey various lines of defense deflationists have taken against purported indeterminacy counterexamples, without pretending to achieve a full resolution of the issues. Paradoxical examples like the liar are often viewed as further cases of indeterminacy, and the discussion of presupposition and vagueness is in some respects a warm-up for tackling the paradoxes later in the book, though it will be seen when we come to them that the paradoxes involve an additional twist.

Chapter 5 is devoted to views we classify as "realist," namely, views taking truth to involve *standing in some appropriate relation to some portion(s) or aspect(s) of reality*. Russell and Moore were realists about truth in this sense at key stages in their careers,

though each changed his mind about truth more than once—our attaching just *one* view to Russell's name in §1.1 and to Moore's in §1.2 was a caricature—and though their versions of realism were distinct and incompatible. Among the heirs of Russell and Moore there is even more disagreement than there was between those pioneers themselves. There is disagreement both over the nature of the "appropriate relation" involved (which some do and some don't call "correspondence") and over the "portion(s) or aspect(s)" of reality involved (which some do and some don't call "truthmakers"). Moreover, there is a division between those satisfied with a fairly abstract and metaphysical account of these matters, and those who see a need for a more concrete and physical account. Along with the different realist views we consider also a realist objection to deflationism alleging that the latter cannot explain why true beliefs are useful, and an objection to realism and deflationism alike alleging that the notion of truth has an *evaluative* role that both groups wrongly neglect.

Chapter 6 is devoted mainly to those who call themselves "antirealists." They reject both deflationism and what we call "realism," though they do not much discuss either. What they do discuss at length, and most emphatically reject, is something else that *they* call "realism," which amounts to what others call *truth-conditional semantics*, to which they oppose something called *verification-conditional semantics*. (Explaining the tangled usages of "realism" will be one of our tasks in this chapter.) Along with antirealism we take note in the same chapter of a more recent position, *pluralism*, which holds that a realist view of truth may be more appropriate for some "domains of discourse" and an antirealist for others. The discussion of pluralism concludes our survey of contemporary theories of the nature of truth, insofar as those can be discussed without bringing in issues about the paradoxes.

We begin our examination of views on liar-style paradoxes in chapter 7, with an account of the work of Saul Kripke, whose "Outline of a Theory of Truth" (1975) has probably been the most influential work on its topic since Tarski's "The Concept of Truth in Formalized Languages" (1935). Our Kripke chapter is organized like our Tarski chapter, with a nontechnical account, containing what is needed to follow discussions in our next and final chapter,

coming in the first half, followed in the second half by sections starred as optional reading, containing more technical material.

Tarski held that it is impossible to avoid paradox unless one distinguishes the language *for* which one is formulating a theory of truth from the language *in* which one is formulating that theory. Kripke in the end seems to concede, however reluctantly, that he has been unable to avoid something like Tarski's split or the "ghost" of it. It is on this point that several subsequent writers have sought to improve on Tarski and Kripke alike. Several proposals are considered in chapter 8, especially views advocating deviation from classical logic and views emphasizing the role of context in communication. Also considered is the defeatist view that no proposed solution to the paradoxes can ever be wholly successful, because the intuitive notion of truth ultimately is simply incoherent. Finally, a connection between this issue of the solvability or unsolvability of the paradoxes and the issues between deflationism and inflationism is briefly sketched. The book then ends, not with a final verdict on the issues, but with suggestions for further reading.

Before launching into our survey we must address a question that we have sidestepped so far, but can hardly hope to continue evading when we get down to closer consideration of the views of specific authors. The question is this: What *kinds* or *sorts* of things or items are true, or as is said, are *bearers* of truth? Presumably the same kinds of things are false as are true, so what we are really asking is: What kinds of things bear truth *or* falsehood, or as is said, bear *truth values*? Or if (as is surely the case) more than one kind of thing can do so, which are the *fundamental* truthbearers? An early confrontation with this question is unavoidable, since the writers whose work we survey often have quite strong opinions on the matter, so that the position adopted on it can affect the whole character of an author's account of truth.

1.5   SENTENCES

One answer quickly suggests itself. Some truths have been written down. (The preceding remark provides an example.) Other truths

have only been spoken. (Readers will have to provide their own examples.) When truths are written or spoken it is *sentences* that are written or spoken, and so it may seem that it is sentences that are the truths, the bearers of truth. The same conclusion can also be reached in a different way. Consider the following dialogue:

(6) *X*: Where there's a will, there's a won't.
     Y: That's true.
     Z: What's true? I didn't hear.

Y may answer *Z* with a direct quotation, thus:

(7) *Y*: *X* said, "Where there's a will there's a won't," and
          that's true.

It seems that the quotation of a sentence designates a sentence, the one quoted. If so, it seems to be a sentence that *Y* is calling true in (6).

But what are sentences? The distinctions that have to be made in response to this question, though they may at first seem pedantic, have proved fundamental to the study of language. Sticking with speech rather than writing for the moment, suppose each of ten greeters on a reception line says successively to each of ten guests, "I'm glad to see you." Is that a hundred sentences or one sentence a hundred times? The usual answer is that it is one sentence *type* and a hundred sentence *tokens*. Does our language have one sentence type "The post office is near the bank" with two meanings, or two with the same pronunciation? Using Greek-derived words for pronunciation and meaning, we may say there is one *phonological* type but two *semantic* types. A phonological type is a sound pattern, a semantic type a sound pattern plus a meaning. Once made, the distinction phonological *vs* semantic can be seen to apply to tokens as well: Producing a phonological token amounts to emitting sounds, as both parrots and people can do, but only the people and not the parrots can thereby speak meaningfully, which is what producing a semantic token amounts to.

Writing (or recorded as opposed to live speech) complicates the story. If the greeters have laryngitis and each greeter writes on a card, "I'm glad to see you," and successively shows it to each

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guest, then there is one type, ten *inscriptions* of the type, and one hundred *presentations* of the inscriptions to a potential reader. Usually the word "token" is used with writing for what there are ten of, but to maintain parallelism with speech it might better be used for what there are one hundred of. As with speech one distinguishes phonological from semantic, so with writing one must distinguish *orthographic* from semantic, since two meanings may share a spelling.

Ambiguity can prevent an orthographic or phonological type from having a fixed truth value: "A bank is an especially dangerous place to be during a flood" is true if riverbanks are meant but false if moneybanks are meant. An even more common phenomenon than ambiguity is so-called *indexicality*, the kind of dependence on features of context (such as who is speaking to whom) that is signaled by what are called *indexicals* (such as "I" and "you"). It can prevent even a semantic type from having a fixed truth value: "I'm glad to see you" is true when said by a greeter sincerely glad to see the guest, and false when said by one merely being polite. In general, a sentence can be the bearer of a fixed truth value only if we understand "sentence" in the sense of semantic token.

Where indexicality is absent, and any possible semantic token would have the same truth value, there will be no harm if we say that the semantic type has that truth value in a secondary sense, and if ambiguity is absent as well, that the orthographic or phonological type has that truth value in a tertiary sense. Thus some types may be recognized as *derivative* truthbearers even if semantic tokens are recognized as the *primary* truthbearers. There is, however, a rival proposal.

1.6   PROPOSITIONS

Returning to the dialogue (6), *Y* may answer *Z* with an indirect rather than a direct quotation, thus:

(7′)   *Y*: *X* said that where there's a will there's a won't, and that's true.

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What is called a *that-clause*, the word "that" with a sentence coming after it, is often held to designate a *proposition*, the proposition *expressed* by that sentence. If so, it is a proposition that Y is calling true in (7′), and that we are calling true when we use the form of expression "That _____ is true" or its stylistic variant "It is true that _____."

Many take propositions to be the *primary* bearers of truth, with sentences being called "true" only in a derivative sense, a sentence being true if it expresses a true proposition. According to this *propositionalist* view, what we took earlier to be reasons for giving first place to semantic sentence tokens as bearers of truth are better taken as reasons for giving them first place as expressers of propositions (but only second place, after propositions, as bearers of truth). Some proponents of the rival *sententialist* view, while still insisting on sentences as the primary truthbearers, allow that a proposition may be called true in a derivative sense if it is or could be expressed by a true sentence. Many sententialists, however, are suspicious of the whole idea of propositions, not least on account of the frequency of disagreements about them among propositionalists themselves.

Propositionalists generally agree that, just as different tokens of the same sentence type may express different propositions, so inversely the same proposition may be expressed by tokens of different sentence types. If Jack says to Jill, "I am younger than you are," and Jill says back to Jack, "You are younger than I am," they have expressed the same proposition, that he is younger than she is. Similarly if Jack says to Jill in English, "I love you," and then in French «Je t'aime.» But here agreement ends. A sentence like "Jack fell down" has a certain grammatical structure. Does the proposition it expresses have a structure as well? One of us may say "Jack loves Jill," calling them by name, and another of us, "He loves her," pointing first to the one, then to the other. Have we expressed the same proposition? To each question, some say yes and some say no. And then there are embarrassing questions asked by linguists. If "that the earth moves" designates the same thing that "the proposition that the earth moves" denotes, why is it that we can say

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    (8a)   Copernicus hypothesized that the earth moves, while the Inquisition anathematized the proposition that the earth moves.

but not

    (8b)   Copernicus hypothesized the proposition that the earth moves, while the Inquisition anathematized that the earth moves.

(Evidently designating a proposition by a that-clause is not quite the same as denoting one by a noun phrase beginning with "the proposition that.") But despite doubts and difficulties, it seems that propositionalists outnumber sententialists.

It also seems that, though many other kinds of things are spoken of as true and false—from assertions and beliefs and conjectures and declarations to remarks and statements and thoughts and utterances—there are at present no serious candidates for the role of *fundamental* truthbearers beyond propositions and sentences (the latter in the sense of semantic tokens).

In particular, while the traditional theories (3)–(5) were formulated in terms of *beliefs*, few today regard beliefs as the *primary* bearers of truth and falsehood, for the following sort of reason, among others: It is possible to believe a disjunction (for instance, that it was either Professor Plum or Colonel Mustard who killed Mr. Boddy) without believing either disjunct, and such a belief may be true; but a disjunction cannot be true unless one disjunct is; so there must be truths that are not believed. Similar considerations apply to assertions. In any case, the very notions of "assertion" and "belief" are ambiguous, since we must distinguish the act or state or event or process or whatever of asserting or believing from the *content* thereof, from *what* is asserted or believed. The most common view today seems to be that the content is a proposition, and that if the act or state or event or process can be called "true" at all, it is only in a derivative sense.

Items of yet other sorts are also spoken of as true or false. One speaks, for instance, of false teeth or false friends. But here we are clearly dealing with different senses of the key words "true" and "false," roughly synonymous with "genuine" and "fake," as can be

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seen from the fact that while a false sentence or proposition is as much a sentence or proposition as a true one, false teeth or friends are no teeth or friends at all. (What is false about them is the proposition that they are teeth or friends.) In sum, other truthbearers beyond sentences and propositions can be and will be more or less ignored for the remainder of this book. But the division between sententialists and propositionalists, which cuts across the division of theorists into realists and antirealists and deflationists, must be borne in mind as we turn to the examination of the views of particular authors, beginning with Tarski.

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