KNOWLEDGE AND TRUTH

When a philosopher undertakes to discuss the nature of truth, it usually happens that we very quickly find him talking about something else .....: linguistic meaning, perhaps, or the nature of knowledge. The reason for this is that the perfectly general question about the nature of truth is only too easily answered. Presumably we know what truth in general is if we know in general what it is for a statement or belief to be true. Well, a statement is true if and only if things are as one who makes that statement thereby states them to be. A belief is true if and only if things are as one who holds that belief thereby holds them to be. This answer is sometimes given the form of a schema : the statement or belief that p is true if and only if p. The schema covers every conceivable case of truth because it allows of any grammatically admissible filling. Thus if someone says that Peter is bald, what he says is true if and only if Peter is bald. If someone believes that $7 + 5 = 12$, what he believes is true if and only if $7 + 5 = 12$. And so on.

The answer is unassailable but frustrating. Surely in raising the general question we wanted something more substantial than this thin and trivial-seeming formula. Perhaps we wanted to know about the nature of those things—thoughts, propositions, statements or beliefs—which we call true or false. Or, hot for certainties as we are, perhaps, we wanted to know about the general conditions under which we may be said to *know* that one of these things is true. And so we find our philosopher turning to these other matters. In particular, recently, under the title of Theories of Truth, philosophers and logicians have been conducting investigations into the general types of *linguistics structure* by mastering which we are able to say and understand the true and false things we do say and understand.

This is not an unnatural turn to take. If it were not for language, truth would amount to very little, because thought would amount to very little—propositional thought, at least, the kind to which the notion of truth is appropriate. Beyond a certain not very advanced point, what we can't say we can't think. But our languages put at our disposal a limitless potential

of thought. They do so because to understand a language is to know, in advance, the significance, of limitless sentences and combinations of sentences; even though we shall only ever use or read or hear a comparatively insignificant proportion of them. A central problem which confronts the theorist of meaning is that of explaining the individual language-user's understanding of the potentially limitless range of the sentences of his language. Evidently the problem cannot be solved at all without crediting the speaker with some kind of mastery of a structure of general rules or principles of combination of linguistic elements—Such a mastery, taken together with a grasp of a finite vocabulary of elements, [individually learned], must contain in itself the possibility of this limitless understanding. The specific problem for the theorist of semantic structure is to disclose the principles of combination involved and make clear their semantic force.

It might be questioned whether the title of truth-theory is appropriate to these investigations. But it is not inappropriate. For the central consideration in understanding the significance of sentences is a grasp of their truth-conditions. To understand a sentence is to know what thought it expresses or is capable, in given contextual circumstances, of expressing; and to know this is to know what we would be believing if we took that thought to be *true*. So the theorist's task can almost equally well be described as that of displaying the limited set of principles which generate the truth-conditions of the limitless sentences of a language.

Almost as well described; but not quite as well. I said that an inquiry into the nature of truth tends to turn, on the one hand, into an inquiry into the nature of meaning, on the other hand into an inquiry into the nature of knowledge. These are not independent inquiries. A theory of meaning must be, I have implied, a theory of understanding. It must not only show how the meanings of sentences are systematically determined by the meanings of constituent words and constructions. It must be able to show how we *understand* meanings as so determined. Understanding a sentence is knowledge of its truth-conditions. But the claim to know what the truth-conditions of a sentence were would be an empty claim if accompanied by a total disclaimer of the ability to recognize when those truth-conditions were fulfilled. More exactly, it would be nonsense to claim to know the truth-conditions

of a sentence but to admit to having no idea what would justify one in either affirming or denying that the conditions were fulfilled. Now a general theory of the justifying conditions for affirming or denying propositions is just what has been traditionally understood as a theory of knowldedge. And so a theory of meaning points to a theory of knowledge. But it may, as I shall try to show, be a slightly misleading pointer.

Let me first return to our simple answer to the general question about the nature of truth. It might be said that the answer is not quite so empty as I suggested. Someone says or believes, say, that Peter is bald. What he says or believes is true if and only if Peter is bald. Does not this formula at least make the point that, as Austin once expressed it, it takes two to make a truth ? For the formula incorporates a two-fold reference : a reference, on the one hand, to a believing or a saying, on the other hand, to that in the world which the statement or belief is about. And it invites us to see the truth as consisting in a certain correspondence or fit between these two things. Moreover, at least in the case of a simple statement like ' Peter is bald ', we can give a quite precise sense to this notion of correspondence or fit—as a word-to-world relation. Such a statement fits the world—or its appropriate bit of the world—if the particular item referred to by the subject-term has the general characteristic assigned to it by the predicate-term. Or in other words : a statement coupling particular name and general predicate is true if and only if the named item satisfies the predicate. Of course not all statements are of this simple form. But any theory which sets out to show systematically how the truth-conditions of sentences of more elaborate construction are determined must be erected on the basis of precisely such simple forms as this. So such sentences lie at the foundation of a semantic theory of truth, a theory of meaning for a language.

And do they not also lie at the foundations of a theory of knowledge ? The ability to recognize some particular individual, perceptually encountered, as possessing some general characteristic seems, on the face of it, fundamental both to linguistic understanding and to knowledge in general. And it is just this simple form of sentence which is best adapted to recording such recognitions; though to be sure, this is not all the simple form is fit for. So, perhaps, we can represent the theory of knowledge and the

theory of meaning as two aspects of a single theory, having a comon base or point of departure and yielding between them all that we can hope for by way of a substantial theory of truth.

However, caution is required. I want to mention two ways in which, if we are not careful, the embrace of these encouraging thoughts may lead us into error. I imagined someone finding it a merit of that simple formula I began with that it incorporated a twofold reference—to a saying or believing on the one hand, to that in the world which the statement or belief was about on the other; and hence envisaging truth as a kind of word-to-world correspondence, best understood in semantical terms. We might call this the realist interpretation of the formula; and my first point is that an incautious commitment to this interpretation, too simply understood, involves the risk of either adopting too narrow a conception of truth on the one hand or of falling into mythology on the other. We say that Peter is bald; that $7 + 5 = 12$; that John ought to look after his sick brother; and so on. All these things we call true. And our thin formula, thinly understood, covers them all. We say and believe that $7 + 5 = 12$; and $7 + 5$ does $= 12$; so what we say and believe is true. But if we now impose the realist interpretation on our formula, matters are not so straightforward. We are in no difficulty with 'Peter is bald'. There is Peter, his head but sparsely adorned with hair, an object in the world, visibly in a condition which fully satisfies the semantic condition for the truth of our statement. But what relations and dispositions of what things in the world make it *true* that $7 + 5 = 12$? or that *if* Peter is bald, *then* Peter is bald ? Again, John and his sick brother are doubtless in the world; the former's activity of caring for the latter may so as well; but where in the world shall we find the relation signified by 'ought' ?

There are two well-known responses to these difficulties, both of which show the power of the realist conception of truth. One is to declare that mathematical equations, the tautologies of logic and moral judgments are not, strictly speaking, statements or propositions at all and hence are not, strictly speaking, true or false. They are to be assimilated, rather, to rules or imperatives. They relate to the ordinary natural world; but they relate to it, not as statements about it, but as recipes for action within it.

The other and opposite reaction is to embrace Platonism in mathematics and logic, and non-natural qualities in the sphere of morals. The philosopher who follows this course does not, like his opponent, limit the concept of truth; instead he extends the concept of reality or the world. He imagines or invents a realm of perfect immutable mathematical objects, the relations between which are simply reflected or mirrored in the truths of mathematics; or, as Moore did, he imagines a layer of non-natural qualities supervening upon the qualities or relations to be found in nature.

Both reactions are unsatisfactory. The first all too cavalierly ignores or overrides the coverage of the concept of truth that we actually have. ' It is true that *p* if and only if *p* '—the unassailable formula that we began with—is no less hospitable to moral judgments and mathematical propositions than it is to records of common observation or history or propositions of natural science. At the very least this fact calls for explanation. The second reaction does indeed offer an explanation. But the explanation it offers is spurious; and a spurious explanation is worse than none at all.

If both reactions are unsatisfactory and they share a common motivation, it is that common motivation which we must question. We must look with a critical eye at that realist conception, that simple notion of correspondence, which encourages one party to limit the extent of truth to what is thought of as the world and encourages the other party to extend the limits of the world to fit what is acknowledged as the truth. Not that we need abondon the simple realist conception altogether. Obviously there are some cases which it fits very well. We should rather take these cases as a starting point, as the primary or basic cases of truth; and then seek to explain how we intelligibly and properly extend the notion of truth beyond these limits and apply it to utterances which play a different and often more complex role in our lives and our thoughts.

Obviously I have not the time, even if I had the power, to undertake now a comprehensive explanation on these lines. I turn instead to another point at which caution is required—all the more so, perhaps, if we envisage such a progressive explanation of the coverage of the concept of truth. I spoke a little earlier of the capacity to recognize a particular situation or individual, with which one is perceptually confronted, as being of a certain general kind

or as possessing a certain general character; and I remarked that this capacity seemed fundamental both to linguistic understanding and to knowledge in general. Fundamental to linguistic understanding; for how else should the basic connexions of meaning, the basic semantic links between word and world, be established ? And fundamental to knowledge; for on what other basis could knowledge be developed, on what othe. *foundations* could the structure of beliefs which each of us counts as his knowledge of the world be erected ?

So at least we rhetorically ask. And so we are encouraged —or some empiricist philosophers are encouraged—to embrace a certain picture of knowledge in general. Consider those propositions which for any experiencing subject, at any moment, are just the propositions which might serve as reports of the results of his exercise of this fundamental capacity of perceptual recognition : reports, that is, of current observation. Surely these propositions must be as fundamental as that capacity. They must be the *foundations* of knowledge.

But now we must ask what this could mean. We must ask what is the doctrine that lies behind the metaphor. In the context of a particular argument or train of reasoning the metaphor of *foundations* has a clear sense. A man starts from certain explicit premises and makes certain implicit assumptions, and argues or reasons, on this basis, to his conclusion. His argument *is* a sort of structure which *rests upon* these premises and assumptions. They are taken as accepted before the construction begins and they have to remain in place throughout the process; if one of them is knocked out, the structure is in danger of collapsing. In such a particular argument or train of reasoning, then, there *are* foundation-propositions; propositions which serve as support for others and are not themselves at the moment regarded as in need of support.

Evidently in such a context foundation-propositions are not just of one special kind; they may be of any kind. The doctrine we are to consider, however, does not relate to particular arguments. It relates to knowledge in general. It seems it must be the dictrine that one special class of propositions, namely observation-propositions, constitute the *ultimate* evidential support, the *ultimate* reasons (or grounds or justification) for our accepting as true everything else we can properly be said to know.

It is still not wholly clear what this means. One thing it might mean is this : that when any person in fact knows some non-observation proposition to be true, then some observation-proposition constitutes the *reason*, or the *ultimate* reason, which that person actually *has* for believing the non-observation proposition.

Unfortunately this is a quite preposterous thesis. It is only slightly less preposterous if one extends the class of observation-propositions to include not only propositions stating what the individual currently observes, but also propositions stating what he can remember observing in the past. The thesis is preposterous in several ways. First, of all the things one knows, it is but an insignificant proportion of which one could truthfully say : my reason, or my basic reason, for believing this proposition is such-and-such an observation which I am either making now or can recall making in the past. Second, even when someone can cite an observation as his reason for believing some other proposition, it is normally a condition of its serving as a reason that the person in question should have other true beliefs which are not thus supported. (Thus my reason for thinking at a certain moment that my petrol tank is empty may be my current observation that the petrol gauge reads zero. But my ability even to make this observation, let alone appreciate its significance, depends on beliefs of mine for which current or remembered observation supplies no reason at all.) Finally, the thesis presupposes a picture of an individual's belief-system which is itself a gross distortion of the facts of mental life.

The picture is that of a kind of hierarchical structure of beliefs with higher members resting on lower members which are the individual's evidence for them or his reasons for believing them and lower members resting on still lower members until we come to the lowest level of all. But it is quite false that an individual's belief-system or set of beliefs is organised in any such way. This is not, of course, to say that members of an individual's belief-set lie entirely loose and separate in his mind, like items in a badly packed suit-case. On the contrary, they are *connected* in numerous and complex ways. But they are not organised like an argument or an army of arguments. Of many propositions it is true that the more securely fixed they are in one's belief-system, the less appro-

priate it seems to ask what one's reasons are for believing them. What are my reasons for thinking that my daughter's name is 'Julia', that the French for rabbit is 'lapin' or that Napoleon was defeated at Waterloo ? One might say : these are things I know too well to have *reasons* for believing.

As a picture of how an individual's belief-system is organised in his mind, the foundationalist thesis is, then, totally unrealistic.

Can we find for it any less unrealistic interpretation ? It is often remarked that none of our beliefs about the world and its working is in principle immune from challenge or question; and when any one of our beliefs is seriously questioned, any rational procedure for settling the question will normally involve putting ourselves in a position to make some relevant observation. So observation-propositions, it may be said, are at least the ultimate *check-points* of knowledge.

This is a more modest claim. Check-points are not foundations. Yet the impact of even this more modest claim is diminished once we realize that the observational check-points cannot function as such without assistance. Thus, many of the observations regarded as relevant to some disputed belief are observations that the observer could not even make, let alone appreciate the relevance of, were it not for the presence in his belief-system of many other beliefs or assumptions which are not themselves in question at the moment of observation. Again, the function of relevant observation, in the case of disputed belief, is very often simply to give the observer access to the past or present *belief* of someone else regarded as authoritative on the matter in question. That the observation in such a case achieves the desired result is itself a belief involving a quite complicated set of further assumptions and while we may grant that no proposition in our belief-system is in principle immune from question, yet we must note that almost any serious question, seriously asked in the shperes of history or natural science or practical affairs, presupposes an enormous framework or background of things taken to be known. In general, at any stage at which *reasons*, *criticism*, *inference* are in question, bodies of pre-existing knowledge or belief provide an indispensable background for these reflective operations; and it is against such a background that observation-propositions play their checking role.

Presumably we require of any theory of knowledge that it should give us a realistic picture of the general character of our knowledge-structures and belief-systems—including, or at least making room for, an account of how they develop and how they may rationally be modified. Such a picture must, of course, among other things, show how propositions of present and remembered observation fit in to the structure. So far the only truth about these propositions which we have been able to dig out from the ruins of the foundationalist metaphor is the rather specific platitude that when a seriously questioned belief is being checked, one has to make some observation, even if it is only a matter of looking at a text or listening to what someone says.

But there is a more general truth to be recovered from these ruins. Evidently the formation of the individual's corpus of belief —the formation of his world-picture—is the outcome of his exposure to, and interaction with, the world, including the training he receives from other members of his community; and evidently such exposure involves observation, seeing and hearing. At some point in this process there emerges the power of critical and self-conscious reflection. Perhaps we should not say that the individiual has a body of *beliefs before* this power emerges; certainly we should not say that this power emerges *before* he has a body of beliefs. As Wittgenstein put it : 'When we first begin to *believe* anything, what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions. (Light dawns gradually over the whole.)' But the point to be stressed now is the ongoing and continuous character of the individual's exposure to the world. At any moment, we may say, our knowledge (or belief) system has to accommodate the beliefs which our current experience *forces on us* at that moment. This may, and generally will, involve no strain; and, as already implied, what our current experience does force on us in the way of belief is a function of the character of the pre-existent system. But the necessity of this kind of accommodation to current experience is a necessity which is always with us; and always was with us, from the time when we could first be credited with beliefs at all; so that from that time onwards all subsequent states of our belief-system are the outcome of the ongoing process of accommodation to the unceasing pressures of experience.

These, then are the elements of truth which we can, and must, retain from the foundationalist thesis. Let me conclude by remarking that we can perhaps retain something else as well : not so much a theoretical insight as a practical precept : a caution against credulity; an encouragment to criticism; a reminder that though not *every* accepted belief or purported piece of information can be checked or tested against the evidence of our eyes and ears, some can be so tested and many should be. We cannot coheretntly question everything at once; a radical and all-pervasive scepticism is senseless; but one of the things we learn from experience is that selective scepticism is wise.

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