

## FOR A MINIMAL THEORY OF TRUTH

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This article deals with the problem of the meaning of truth and of its extension. The synthetic approach taken here is deliberate. Its possible drawback is compensated by the conclusions arrived at which though "minimal" are, we hope, firmly established. The aim is to vindicate as well as to interpret and expand the main thesis of L. Johnson's "Focusing on Truth"<sup>1</sup>. We agree with him that there is a minimal theory of truth applicable to all cases of what is said and can be said about reality. There are not various meanings of the term "truth" nor are there various types of truth. We do not take philosophical truth as different from scientific or religious truth. We take it in its epistemological sense. Truth is about whether and how reality can be reached by human knowledge. Our statements are meant to be truth-bearers. They can be true or false. At times though they can be simply meaningful without the qualification of being true or false. Two questions need to be examined. The first is about the meaning and intention of the concept of truth when predicated of our statements. The second is about the extension of that concept. What kinds of statements are true or can be true in the sense we shall have first defined? If truth has only one minimal meaning universally applicable to all our statements, which of these fulfil the specified truth-conditions?

Johnson adopts some form of the "correspondence theory" of truth similar to that of J. L. Austin.<sup>2</sup> But since B. Russel and the *Tractatus* understood it in the sense of congruence, the term "correspondence" is far too ambiguous and open to criticism and it is now replaced by "correlation" or "reference" or "description". True statements are those which refer to an external phenomenal reality and describe it well. Statements lacking such reference or failing to describe a state of affairs are not true. According to Austin what makes our statements true are the facts, situations and states of affairs which are things in the world and which our statements describe correctly<sup>3</sup>.

Now, as P. F. Strawson has aptly remarked - and his criticism is endorsed

by Johnson<sup>4</sup> - Austin's view is hazardously overobjectivist. Are facts, situations or states of affairs "things of the world" or statements about these things? Do the facts and situations constitute the objects of the description or are they the verbal description of these objects? We are here on a dangerous ground, wanting illicitly to join words and the world via facts, situations, states of affairs. We want to correlate words and the world to arrive at true statements but we only end up in correlating words with words. For Strawson this is an insurmountable predicament and this makes him draw the consolation that true statements cannot be defined in terms of correlation to an external world. Any form of "correspondence" theory must be abandoned and the nature of "truth" must be found somewhere else<sup>5</sup>.

But even if the objection raised by Strawson against any form of "referential theory of truth cannot be easily sidestepped, there are weighty arguments for not abandoning the view that the truth of our statements has some essential reference to the outside world. But exactly what? And how is one to express the relationship properly? Is there a way of saving Austin's view from being too naively objectivist? Instead of a total rejection, can we not find a corrective to his view? If Johnson does not follow Strawson's radical criticism of Austin, it is presumably because he recognizes that the task of philosophical reflection is to enlighten and clarify, not to redefine for one's own convenience, the concepts of common use in ordinary language. Have we the right to alter the meaning of the concept of truth in an arbitrary way so as to make it more attainable? There is little to gain in the revisionist strategy. Take the semantic concept of truth : it is a technical concept, highly determinate and part of a particular formalized language, so much so that it has nothing to do with the concept and problem of truth in natural language. Like in chess where the position and movement of each piece are preestablished, the semantic approach adopts a predetermined definition of truth as a basis and starting point of a particular formal system. What is true is so by definition, a kind of initial postulate. The semantic project is an example among many others of a theory of truth which has nothing to do with the real problem of truth as raised by centuries of human thought and experience. That is why we need to hold firm to a "referential" theory of truth on the model proposed by Austin with the correctives brought about by Johnson, and these we shall now briefly present.

"Facts, situations, states of affairs" - to which our statements (if true) refer and make them to be true - are dangerous terms as they seem to imply

too much of "things as they are found in the world". Instead Johnson proposes the use of the expression "referential focus". Our statements are true when they establish a referential focus. This occurs when "our words are correlated with worldly features as conceptualized and construed by us" <sup>6</sup>. This means that two conditions must be fulfilled. First, we talk of what is actually in the world, we refer to an external reality. Second, we describe things in the words as conceptualized by us. We come to grips with the real world but according to our own ideas, interests and attitudes. The external world is like a stage that we observe but what we see depends much on how we illuminate it. All our true statements are referential but there can be no reference without focusing.

This way of stating the referential theory of truth removes the vulnerability of Austin's objectivism. Our true statements are those that reach out to the phenomenal world but our description of it is molded by our conceptual schemes. It cannot be otherwise but at the same time it does not prevent our statements from being true. Our necessarily subjective, perspectival approach cannot be an obstacle to the truth of our statements. The referential aspect of our statements is all that matters. This means that we can never reach the reality-in-itself - contrary to Austin's claim. We can only describe the world according to our viewpoints under our own conceptual schemes.

This "minimal" theory of truth is all, nothing more and nothing less. Nothing more so as not to fall into the excess of naive objectivism - as if our true statements could refer to "things- as-found-in-the-world". But nothing less either - as if the truth of our statements had nothing to do with reference to an outside reality and as if, consequently, we were compelled to adopt the revisionary tactic of defining truth in an arbitrary way. Johnson's theory of "referential focus" seems to be a safe middle path between these extremes.

One may raise a question here concerning these "conceptual schemes" or focusing activities without which we are unable to refer to the outside world and make true statements about it. We cannot state the truth without the compulsory "bias" of our conceptual schemes,. Does it not follow that the unavoidable perspectivism of our knowledge of reality brings about the very distortion that we want to avoid when we state the truth? For our statements to be true, is it necessary that they not only refer to an external world but also that they are made with conceptual schemes that are themselves "true"? Whose statements are true : those of the materialist or those of the spiritualist? They

both attend to the same external reality but each one gives a contradictory interpretation of this reality. Therefore should we not say that when we make statements in establishing a "referential focus" - to use Johnson's expression - the truth or falsity of the statements stems as much or even more from the focusing itself as from the reference? We all look at the same stage in front of us. The disagreement about the truth or falsity is not about what we look at but about how we illumine what we see. One could say that our focusing itself is true or false. But is there any meaning in saying that? To this issue we shall now turn.<sup>7</sup>

We reach here a turning-point in our understanding of the "minimal" concept of truth. In fact to ask whether our conceptual schemes themselves are true or false is meaningless because only statements can be true or false and the conceptual schemes are those by which and through which we make our statements. The perspectivism which necessarily affects all our statements cannot itself be a truth-bearer. Whatever be the light we throw on what we see, provided our light-focus falls well on the stage and not outside it, our statements about it are true. They express particular viewpoints but it is enough that these viewpoints are about the outside world for them to be true. We must re-emphasize : truth lies in the reference, not in the modality of the reference.

It may be objected that if all our empirical statements about an external reality are true independently of the particular focusing of the language-user, then it follows that for example both the materialist and the spiritualist statements about the world are equally true. But this objection falls through once we realise the implications of the minimal theory of truth, namely that all our empirical statements are true if taken together and seen as complementing each other. Indeed through our statements about the phenomenal world we express a large variety of truths about it. This has nothing to do with the idea of one Truth which is a mere abstraction. The truths we state in describing the phenomenal reality are partial and limited, molded according to our particular focusing. The epistemological truth with which we are concerned here depends on what we are, on what we as limited beings can say about reality in a variety of ways and interpretations. Every language-user has his own manner of illumining the stage and one mode of illumination is as good as another. Our empirical statements are all true even if they only describe a part or an aspect of the outside world. They are not half-truths, they are true in the full sense of the term because they refer to and describe well the phenomenal reality.

On the other hand the statements that do not refer to an external reality are false. In an insane or schizoid mind conceptual schemes do not illuminate any external reality but a world created in one's own mind, hanging up there in the air. It may also be the case of purely ideological statements made by people in full possession of their intellectual faculties but who fail to describe any external reality. Their statements do not establish a referential focusing but are only as it were - mere "focusing". The illumination of the conceptual schemes falls outside the stage only to return to its source in a perfectly circular process. In spite of the intention of the language-user such statements are not referential but merely ideological. They disclose only the mind of the language-user, nothing about the world. Such statements which are merely ideological and have no reference to the outside world are false. How to single out the ideological statements from the empirical ones? This is a legitimate question but it exceeds the scope of this paper for we are not concerned with the criteria of truth but with the nature and meaning of truth. True statements are those that refer to and describe well an external world. If they fail to do so as is the case with the insane mind or the ideologist, they are false. All other empirical statements are true.

It is found that empirical statements often contradict each other. How are they to be reconciled? In fact there is nothing to reconcile, for all our statements reveal an aspect of reality. Our many statements do not conflict with each other, they complement each other. The language-user who makes a true statement welcomes other statements as well for he is aware of the insufficiency of his approach. His particular true statement does not imply the falsity of another's empirical statement. He knows that many statements other than his own are true and this awareness acts as a stimulus for him not only to be tolerant of but also to initiate a dialogue with others. The truths of our statements must be made to harmonize and converge and this can be achieved only in dialogue. We cannot be self-satisfied with the truths we have arrived at for no human truth is final, and reality is ever richer than what we can know about it. The personal attainment of truth includes the commitment to dialogue with all truth-seekers.

So much for the truth-conditions of empirical statements. What has been arrived at till now will serve as a criterion for the evolution of other types of statements in science, ethics and religion. Now if true statements are defined as those that refer to and describe well an external reality, how far does the concept of truth extend?

It is conventional to divide statements into the analytic and the synthetic and consequently to differentiate between the two types of truth : analytic truth and synthetic truth. The minimal theory of truth cannot accept this dualism of meaning. Analytical statements are surely meaningful statements but as such they cannot be said to be either true or false. We reject the idea that anything can be true by definition. The essential truth condition of referentiality must always be fulfilled and it is absent in the case of analytical judgment. Likewise mathematical statements can be neither true nor false except if they are made to apply to reality. As for statements expressing scientific theories the case is different. Unlike analytical and mathematical statements, scientific theories have an indirect reference to an outside reality. They serve as good and fruitful instruments to understand reality. As Johnson writes<sup>8</sup> : "Reality passes judgement on scientific theories but not on mathematical formulae and systems". Scientific theories have a truth-relevant utility. Their function is not to say the truth but to hope in the making of true statements, As mere theories they are less reliable than mathematical statement - they, but not mathematical statements, could be meaningless. In any case the question of truth in scientific theories is less important than the pragmatic question of usefulness.

As for metaphysical statements, to say that they are true, would mean that they refer to and describe well an external phenomenal world. But metaphysics deals with the meta-phenomenal. As Kant has demonstrated the project is futile and impossible. No true statements can be made about a non-phenomenal "reality" which is not a "reality-for-us" and thus belongs to the realm of the unknowable. But there is another way of envisaging the metaphysical project which could be viable, According to Johnson<sup>9</sup> metaphysical theories could be regarded as a manner of explaining the phenomenal reality in a way similar to scientific theories, though at a different level of explanation. Why not hold with K. Popper that meaningful theories - whether scientific or metaphysical are those which, though falsifiable, can withstand falsification successfully and thus explain the progress of knowledge? Between scientific and metaphysical theories there would be only difference of degree, the most important being that the scientific theories are closer to reality than the metaphysical ones since they have more to do directly with the empirical world. Metaphysical statements are neither true nor false but like scientific statements they may be truth-relevant; they may be instrumental in and useful for making true statements about the phenomenal reality.

Ethical statements differ from empirical statements in that they do not refer to brute facts but to the values and qualities attributed to these facts or situations. Can either statements be truth-bearers. What do we do when we ascribe values to an external reality? We recognize that certain facts and situations are valuable and we make statements that refer to and describe a valuable reality. In this case the referential focusing that we establish does not stop short at the brute facts. It reaches further and deeper as it were into the value of these facts and situations. Could we call such ethical statements true or false? Here three possibilities are open. If in Platonist fashion we regard that things are valuable in themselves, then the world of values constitute an "external reality" just like the brute facts about which one can make true or false statements. The second option, less vulnerably objectivist and probably wiser, holds that things are not valuable in themselves but because we value them on the basis of certain standards that for some reasons - not to be discussed here - we consider as universally valid. We recognize our conscience as the repository of a stable moral order. Consequently in this perspective ethical statements can be true or false. The truth-condition of reference to and description of a phenomenal reality is fulfilled. In the case of ethical statements this phenomenal reality is taken for the universally acknowledged standards of the moral other of our conscience. According to the third option, advocated by F. Nietzsche, man does not in any way discover values but he creates them so that not only things have no values in themselves but also no objective standard of values can serve as a basis of the moral order. Consequently ethical statements are no longer referential, they have nothing to do with the truth. Understandably Nietzsche treated the truth with contempt seeing it as the major obstacle to absolute freedom. He was right for true statements imply the recognition of a reality that we have not created : either a cosmic reality before us or a moral order within us.

Why do people of religion make doctrinal statements and submit them as the expression of some religious truth? Is it possible for religious statements to be truth-bearers? This is our final question dealing with the extension of the concept of truth. Unlike metaphysical statements that can be truth-relevant and conducive to make true statements about the phenomenal reality, most religious statements have to do with a reality other than the phenomenal world of empirical knowledge, an otherworldly reality, transcendent beings, etc. . . If true statements establish a referential focus, the problem with religious statements is

that they refer to something else than the phenomenal reality or ordinary knowledge. If one follows the logic of the minimal theory of truth defined above, it is clear that religious statements are neither true nor false and are not even truth-relevant. They could be assimilated to what we have called above "ideological" statements but there is a difference between them. While the latter lapses into the error of circularity by lacking any reference whatsoever, religious statements are referential but their reference is to a non-phenomenal reality. So in both cases the reference to the phenomenal world is missing. Consequently neither ideological nor religious statements are entitled to be true.

The fact is that religious statements are made on the basis of faith, trust and traditions. People in religion venture to make statements because they believe in them, not because their statements are truth-bearers. If they believe that doctrinal pronouncements are true they are led astray by overstatement. Truth is never a matter of faith. One does not "believe" in truth but recognizes it. That is why conflicts over religious tenets are never arguments about truths but squabbles between unresolvable beliefs and traditions. There is no conflict but complementarity between various true statements.

Why then should religious people be keen to make doctrinal statements if these are not truth-bearers? Here we should keep in mind that we often make statements with no intention of conveying some truth. Many of our statements are not meant to be truth-bearers and we know it. This is the case for example with analytical and mathematical statements. It is also the case with religious statements made perhaps for some legitimate reason but other than that of stating the truth.

It would not be correct to describe religious phenomena as only a matter of doctrines and statements about non-phenomenal realities. For a mystic, religion is an experience *sui generis*, an ineffable wisdom. Such religion is in silence; it establishes a referential focus inexpressible by words and statements. This is a "truth" to be lived, not to be spoken about.

And now to sum up. The claim made in this essay is that a proper theory of truth must be minimal. It must not say too little but it must not say too much either. There is only one sense in which our statements are true and it is not remote from the common understanding of "truth" in ordinary language. Our statements are true when they establish a referential focusing. We say the truth when through our statements we refer to and describe well an external



phenomenal world through our conceptual schemes. We reach outside to the outside reality through what we state about it but what we state depends in great part on how we illuminate the outside reality. The truth we thus state is always our truth.

As for the extension of the concept of truth thus defined, we have reached the following conclusions. Two types of statements fulfil the required truth-conditions : empirical statements about an external phenomenal reality as well as ethical statements made on the basis of recognised standards of values. Metaphysical and scientific statements are useful to make true statements and are accordingly truth-relevant. Analytical and mathematical statements are neither true nor false but meaningful. Ideological statements are never true nor false but meaningful. Ideological statements are never true because they lack reference to an outside world. Finally, religious statements cannot be truth-bearers as their reference exceeds the boundary of the knowable phenomenal reality.

#### NOTES

- 1) JOHNSON, LAWRENCE, *Focusing on Truth*, Routledge, London and Now York, 1992.
- 2) *Ibid.*, p. 176.
- 3) *Ibid.*, p. 156.
- 4) *Ibid.*, p. 157.
- 5) *Ibid.*, p. 173.
- 6) *Ibid.*, p. 177-179.
- 7) This point is not discussed by Johnson.
- 8) *Ibid.*, p. 238.
- 9) *Ibid.*, p. 244.

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