

Truth in a Post-Relativist Age

“Two things fill [my] mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the more often and steadily [I] reflect upon them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me”

(Immanuel Kant, Critique of Practical Reason)

“If a man says that there is no such a thing as truth, you should take him at his word and not believe him”.

(Roger Scruton)

The Age of Post-Relativism

In classical times there were considered to be three absolute values: truth, beauty and goodness, which were considered to be rooted in the unbroken order of things, the relationship of mankind to the cosmos and the gods. In the period of modernity a spirit of relativism pervaded and these values were no longer considered to be absolute. Hume and the sceptical tradition epitomised by Moore's *Principia Ethica* have considered the good to be merely the preference of the individual, and aesthetic relativism beauty to be 'in the eye of the beholder'. However, recent scientific work on altruism and perception suggest that there are objective correlates of subjective feelings of value, in these cases actions and structural disposition. In the case of truth, the feeling of 'trueness' should be matched to an objective correlate, which in common with the philosophical tradition I take to be actual existence.

In a simpler age there were the truths of religion and there were the truths of the voices of authority, often those who transmitted the sacred words or who represented divinity on earth, such as kings and emperors. With the Reformation and the Enlightenment those truths began to lose their grip on the imagination of greater numbers and be displaced by the truths of science and the authoritative voice of a community of experts in various fields such as law, politics and economics. It may be that in our time, under the twin influences of postmodern philosophy, with its radical de-centring of subjectivity and deconstruction of all forms of authority, and the technology of the information society, exemplified by the Internet, we are entering a post-relativist age, one not characterised by the tolerance and compromise fostered by recognising the limitations of knowledge in a relativistic milieu, but one in which, paradoxically, extravagant claims to truth are made in a nihilistic one.

It might be surprising that the notion of truth is still taken seriously, many believing it to have been displaced by a thoroughgoing relativism with regards to omniscient claims. But one of the long-recognised problems of relativism is that it logically undercuts its own suppositions: it cannot be a true statement that there is no such thing as truth. It is probably the case, though, that the advocates of relativism had something more specific in mind, the non-existence of 'Truth' as an absolute, allied to moral absolutism, and although relativism might not be entirely out of the woods, it is widely accepted that the assertions and authority of theology, sovereignty and metaphysics have been rightly demystified and debunked. What might be less well known is that science has also lost its privileged place as a purveyor of truth; scientific theories are now generally considered to be useful creations rather than discoveries of the iron laws of nature. It is only in logic and in mathematics that the notion of truth remains largely intact, although even here outriggers of postmodernism, such as feminist theory and 'queer' theory have been transvaluating rational thought's central tenets into the will to dominate and deploying the gambit of victimisation.

It is, though, in the field of politics that the most obvious manifestations of post-relativism are found: the assumption of, and attribution of, bad faith to whatever and whoever takes a different perspective, regardless of the evidence; the concoction of 'alternative facts' and the accusation of 'fake news' in a zero-sum game in which the rules of civilised discourse and the arduous responsibility of arriving at something like the truth in a complex social world have been laid aside; and the grandstanding assumption of indubitable infallibility based for the most part not on knowledge and experience but on prejudices sourced in groupthink and exacerbated by the 'echo chamber' of social media.

Theories of Truth and the Phenomenology of the Lived-World

While not the source of the problem, it does not help that current theories of truth within philosophy are based on very narrow criteria. The two prevailing models of truth are the *correspondence theory* of truth, in which statements made about reality correspond to the facts as they are known and the *coherence theory* of truth, in which statements have logical coherence with other validated propositions. The correspondence theory of truth goes back to Aristotle but has had modern exponents in Russell and Austin. Russell, for example, stated that for a statement to be true every linguistic element in the statement, such as the relationship between a subject and object must correspond to a factual reality. While commonsensical for many mundane, concrete descriptions, this would seem inadequate for any state of affairs in which interpretation is called for; for example, how would one determine even the simple judgement that a particular road was a long road was objectively true?

A sister theory of correspondence theory is Tarski's Semantic theory of truth, which states that a proposition of the form "snow is white" is true if and only if snow is white, the two occurrences of the phrase belonging to the primary language and metalanguage respectively. This establishes the condition of whether a 'true' or 'false' truth value can be attributed to a statement cast as a tautology, but not whether the referent of the statement is true or not. A parallel example would be the statement "kryptonite is green" is true if and only if kryptonite is green. The conditions for attributing a truth value are the same, but the referents have a different ontological status. Since kryptonite does not exist outside of the (imaginary) world of the Superman comics, kryptonite is neither green nor any other colour. So although this would satisfy Tarski's conditions for attributing a false truth value to the statement, it seems to me that that would not be evaluated on a par with a statement such as "sulphur is blue" in which an attributive error, rather than a category error, had been committed.

Both these versions of correspondence, to my mind, suffer the same limitations. The first is that they limit themselves to so-called real (i.e. physical) objects, whereas many of the things that language speaks of are non-physical, abstract or imaginary. The problem is their positivistic notion of existence, the reduction of reality to basic fundamentals over which they claim there is no dispute. However, there is no existence which is not problematic. Take, for instance, the proposition that the earth is round and orbits the sun. It was once considered heretical to make public such a belief. Today the denial of either of these accepted facts is considered a mark of eccentricity or perversity. But how has the proposition "the earth is round and orbits the sun" been established as true¹, since very few have had the opportunity to experience this directly? It is on the basis of an established intellectual tradition that the word has percolated down even to the least intellectual through school textbooks and popular culture. Every piece of so-called evidence could have an alternative explanation. We take it in good faith that the experts who assert that it is so have the means to evaluate the evidence and the theory that binds the evidence into a coherent explanation as fundamentally sound. For all that, the emergence of the internet has spawned and hosts a multiplicity of flat-earth conspiracy theorist websites and other alternate ways of seeing reality, from committed ufologists to millennialist movements and religious extremists, that have eroded faith in reason and empirical evidence garnered by experts among much of the public, to be replaced by personal opinion and 'common sense' (both of which are extremely unreliable).

According to Wittgenstein at the opening of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, "The world is all that is the case", meaning whatever is true must be an existing object or an existing state of affairs, such that stating Y of X must be true if X exists and Y is a quality that pertains to X. However, in order to address the range of objects or events found in the phenomenal world of human experience, it is necessary to part company with such *logical positivism* and its insistence on 'atomic facts' and take a phenomenological position that whatsoever we speak of has a proper mode of

existence. In other words, it is necessary to expand the range of fundamental ontology, over which truth values can be asserted, to include at least social ontology and the ontology of the psyche. It seems to me that there are six categories of knowledge to which the label 'truth' can be attached, though I am not dogmatically committed to this: the truth that nature, great art and great acts reveal to us; the truths contained in sacred texts and institutions; authority, the mystique surrounding it and its pronouncements; matters of fact encountered in the everyday; theories, such as those of science and philosophy; and tautologies, as in mathematics and logic. The only thing that binds these together is the requirement that their 'truth' be conceived as related to a mode of existence. That is to say, that nothing can be said to be true unless it is held to exist in some manner.

This brings me to the second limitation of these theories: that they do not establish the conditions upon which correspondence between a statement and the actual state of affairs described can be said to hold or not to hold, other than to affirm or deny that they do. In fact, the conditions of truth for an object or state of affairs can be said to be met when they are defined in a dialectic of conceptualisation and evaluation, that is, their mode of existence is both conceptualised and incorporating – even implicitly – a method by which the assertion of existence can be judged. For example, if a unicorn were to be defined as a horned horse, then any statement that contained a reference to unicorns, such as "I encountered a unicorn in the forest" would be easily refuted as no such creatures exist; however, if it were defined as a *mythical* horned horse, then the same statement would be taken allegorically or dramatically. Less obviously, we do this with everyday objects. How would one know that a particular object was a cup unless we had imbibed a concept of a cup that was continually validated in our everyday experience? Contrast this, then, with the bafflement or indifference with which we encounter unfamiliar objects for which we have no conception or understanding of their use.

The conflict between religion and science is largely about conflicting ideas of truth and the misapprehension from both sides of the nature of the truths that they are promoting. A less restrictive ontology could broaden our conception of what we consider part of the real. A case could even be made for the existence of God as an object of faith that can only be apprehended through a life of faith. However, both religion (at least of the more fundamentalist varieties) and science (allied to atheistic fundamentalism) believe that religion is advocating truths that are evidentially demonstrable, as an alternative or equivalent to science, for example about the origin of the universe or the origin of life. But this was not the view of truth that was promulgated by classical religion, such as in the theologies of Augustine or Averroes (Ibn Rushd), nor indeed by the more open-minded modern commentators. The palaeontologist and evolutionary theorist Steven Jay Gould has spoken of the 'non-overlapping magisteria' of science and religion, in which both address the same reality from different perspectives. Simply put, we could say that science addresses the facts of reality through theory and data and religion addresses the meaning of

reality through stories and metaphor. Even though atheists experience the awe-inspiring nature of cosmic reality, they are hampered in expressing this in the reductive language of science and frequently take refuge in the spiritual language of parable and metaphor.

Of course, definitions are not always attached to statements, nor should they necessarily be, as this would be an imposition on the beauty and simplicity of language. Most statements are understood in context anyway. This favours a coherence theory of truth in which statements are anchored in others which are verifiable, though I have argued that we need a broader range of the conditions in which verification takes place.

Conclusion: the Future of Truth

At the tail end of modernism the reduction of truth claims within philosophy to factual statements about the world and the relativizing of truth within the social sciences have both had a profound effect on the cultural landscape. It has destroyed the authority of the religious voice within Western cultures, while allowing new forms of humanistic tolerance to thrive. Once unleashed, radical scepticism in its postmodern manifestation has devoured every form of authority and the notion of truth itself, leaving only discourses of power. In such a nihilistic milieu even tolerance, by tolerating the intolerant, is turning into intolerance.

As such, we are losing the ability to contextualise the utterances of those with whom we may not share the same outlook in a broader framework of accommodation, and instead are tempted to aggressively defend our small islands of privileged insight. There is, however, an interpretation of postmodernism, rooted in its phenomenological origins, that allows truth claims to be contextualised in the life experience of communities of shared values. If we can absorb the modernist critique of certainty while affirming the human quest for truth in its multiple forms, that will go some way to healing the fractured state of discourse today.

Notes

1. Or approximately true, as the earth is flattened at the poles, and it is more accurate to say the earth and sun revolve around a common axis.