

Truth as a Value

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Philosophers over the centuries have thought hard about truth. Non-philosophers too have been puzzled about it. One famous non-philosopher, Pontius Pilate, governor of Judea, after asking the question “What is truth?”, went on to wash his hands. But what is truth, really?

There are two important strands in our thinking about truth. The *first* is to say that truth is a property of our beliefs in virtue of which they correspond to the world. To say that a belief is true is to say that the world is the way it is described by the propositional content of the belief. As Aristotle famously said: “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, or of what is not that it is not, is true” (*Metaphysics* 1011b25). It is not hard to see why the concept of truth is given this *objective* content. Truth gives us purchase on the world. It connects our thoughts and beliefs to some external reality, thereby giving them representational content. An objective concept of truth does not only explain the representational accuracy of our beliefs. It also explains the success of our actions. Our actions are based on our beliefs and when our actions succeed, it is natural to say that they succeed in virtue of the fact that the beliefs that guide them are true: their truth-conditions obtain. On this way of thinking about truth, truth is an *external* constraint on what we believe. Some beliefs meet it (by corresponding to facts) while others do not (by failing to correspond to facts). We can sum up this first strand in our thinking about truth by saying that truth is a factual (*value-free*) property.

There is, however, a second strand in our thinking about truth, viz., that truth is an *evaluative* concept. William James, the leader of the American Pragmatists, put this point as follows: “truth is *one species of good*, and not, as is usually supposed, a category distinct from good, and co-ordinate with it. *The true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite, assignable reasons*”. On this view, truth amounts to epistemic rightness. To say of a belief that it is true is to say that it is epistemically right, or justified, to have it. So a belief is true if it is licensed by some epistemic norms, i.e., if it is issued by suitable methods or if it satisfies some epistemic conditions (e.g., being ideally justified). Accordingly, truth is

an *internal* constraint on what we believe. Beliefs are not true because they bear a special relation with reality but because they satisfy some norms issued by us. This way of viewing truth makes it *normative*: truth summarises the norms of correct assertion or belief. This point needs to be highlighted. Whatever else it is, truth is something that has not an expiry date. Unlike dairy products, truth cannot go off. If a belief is *true* now, it has been true in the past and will stay true in the future. In this sense, truth cannot be equated with acceptance. Nor can it be equated with what communities or individuals agree on, or with what the present evidence licences. If we made these equations, truth would not be a stable property of beliefs. It could come and go all too easily. Besides, if we made these equations, we would end up with a thoroughly relativised conception of truth. But relativism about truth, viz., the claim that truth ascriptions are always relative to a person or a community, is ugly and self-refuting, anyway. Hence it is crucial, when we think of truth as an evaluative concept, to think of the norms that govern its use as objective. We can sum up this second strand in our thinking about truth by saying that truth is a *value*.

To see why truth is, at least partly, a value, consider the case of G. E. Moore's paradox. Suppose I am saying in one breath: *it is true that it is now raining in Peru, but I don't believe that it is now raining in Peru*. I cannot say this in a coherent way. For, in saying that it is true that it is now raining in Peru, I assent to the proposition *that it is now raining in Peru*. But in saying that I disbelieve that it is now raining in Peru, I dissent from the proposition *that it is now raining in Peru*. Since I cannot assent to and dissent from the very same proposition at the same time, I am contradicting myself. The situation is totally analogous in ethics. I cannot coherently state that 'This is the right thing to do morally, but I morally disapprove of doing it'. In this context, 'true' and 'right' behave in exactly the same way. And as in ethics *right* stands, at least partly, for a value (it signifies moral approval), so in epistemology *truth* stands, at least partly, for a value (it signifies *epistemic* approval).

But why should we value truth? This question was raised in a compelling form by James in his famous essay *The Will to Believe*. He noted that in forming our opinion we pursue two main aims: "*we must know the truth; and we must avoid error*". Both of these "commandments", or "laws", as James put them, are truth-linked. Yet they are distinct and different: the first puts a premium on believing *all* truths, while the second puts a premium on believing *only* truths. If our only aim were to believe all truths, then we could believe everything, thereby making sure that all truths are caught

within the net of our beliefs. If, on the other hand, our only aim were to believe only truths, then we could make sure that we believe only tautologies. Searching after truth is a demand for risky beliefs. Avoiding error is a demand for secure beliefs. The two aims pull in contrary directions.

We want our beliefs to satisfy both norms because we value truth. But these norms can be in conflict with each other. At the one end, one may value believing in truth at the expense of avoiding error. At the other end, one may value avoiding error at the expense of having true beliefs. If we want to move between credulity and scepticism in forming our beliefs, we should strike a balance between the two norms. Yet, the very notion of balance between two conflicting norms calls for a *value-judgement*. The measure of balance is *not* an objective matter (even though achieving truth and avoiding error are). It will depend on the context and on our interests.

Valuing truth, then, is constitutive of our being cognitive beings. Some might think that truth has only instrumental value. Having true beliefs enables us to satisfy our desires, from getting by in our ordinary lives to uncovering the secrets of the universe. But truth has an intrinsic value, as well. This is made clear if we think of two truth-linked virtues that we want our beliefs to possess, *accuracy* and *sincerity*, as Bertrand Williams has recently put them. We do our best to acquire accurate beliefs and what we say reveals what we believe. Both virtues presuppose a respect for truth, for its own sake as it were. Indeed, though accuracy may be taken to be a factual property of belief, sincerity is clearly an irreducible virtue of the believer. It is an intrinsically good thing to be sincere and hence trustworthy.

It may well be that the value of truth has an evolutionary explanation. Actually, it can be seriously maintained that evolution has shaped our cognitive system in such a way as to be able to find many truths about the world. If we were totally useless in finding out truth, we would have been extinct long ago. So it may be said that truth has *survival value*. But this evolutionary explanation cannot be the whole story. For though some truths do have survival value, it is not clear that all truths have. What is the survival value, for instance, of the truth of high-energy physics or of abstract mathematics? An evolutionary explanation will certainly be part of the answer of why truth is valuable. But it seems it cannot be the whole story. Truth is a primary good: something that we should value because of its intrinsic qualities.