METAPHYSICS AND EPISTEMOLOGY

The concept of truth

We shall deal with the concept we use when calling a view, a sentence, an assertion, etc. true. We shall not deal with the concept that words like 'true' express when they mean 'real' (as when we say 'X is a true friend').

1. Correspondence theories of truth say, in a typical form, that a sentence is true iff it corresponds to a fact. Examples of facts are the fact that the Earth rotates, the fact that Athens is the capital of Greece, etc. Generally, each fact is the fact that ….It is generally accepted that facts are things other than events, although I will not expand on that.

Those theories ought, first of all, to explain what kind of entities facts are and what the correspondence consists in. And, in order not to define truth circularly, they must explain facts and correspondence without using the concept of truth. E.g., they must not say that facts are the entities that render some sentences true and others false, nor that correspondence is the relation that obtains between a true sentence and the fact that renders it true. Correspondence theories of truth also ought to tackle an argument that G. Frege formulated against them. In his view, in order for there to be a correspondence between two entities, they must coincide like banknotes of the same value, yet a true sentence and something real usually cannot coincide in that sense, as they are very different entities. (Banknotes of the same value have the same number of parts — lines and colour patches — and the same organization of those parts.)

One correspondence theory of truth is the theory we find in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* about the so-called elementary sentences. According to it, a fact consists in the existence of one or more states of affairs, and a state of affairs consists in some simple (not composite) objects combined in some way. An elementary sentence, now, is made up of names combined in some way. These names are names of simple objects. The elementary sentence presents a state of affairs: those objects' being arranged in the way in which the names are arranged within the sentence. An elementary sentence is not like an ordinary sentence. It is something like a picture of a state of affairs: the sentence has as many constituents as the state of affairs, and the constituents of the one are structured just like the constituents of the other. But, unlike ordinary pictures, this common structure is not a spatial structure, but more abstract. (So the correspondence between the sentence and the state of affairs is analogous to the correspondence between banknotes of the same value, but there also differences. One difference is that, in the banknotes, the parts of the one are not names of the parts of the other.) The elementary sentence is true iff the corresponding state of affairs exists, that is, constitutes a fact. As for any ordinary sentence, it admits of a full analysis, which will reduce it to many elementary sentences connected by means of truth-functional connectives, such as 'and', 'or', 'not', etc., although we are not able to carry out that analysis. (A word or phrase is a *connective* iff it can take one or more sentences, e.g. the sentences 'The Sun revolves round the Earth' and 'The Earth rotates', and yield a more composite sentence, e.g. 'The Sun revolves round the Earth or the Earth rotates'. The connective is *truth-functional* provided the truth-values of the sentences it takes determine the truth-value of the sentence it yields. There are two

truth-values: truth and falsity.)

How did Wittgenstein end up with that theory? It seems that his problem was to explain how it can be that some sounds that come out of our mouths, or some marks on a paper, concern things and situations beyond themselves. And it seems that the only explanation he could think of is that the sounds or marks should, at least at bottom, have a pictorial character.

The theory was highly original, but faced serious problems. One was that Wittgenstein was not able to find any examples of elementary sentences (nor any examples of simple objects) No ordinary sentence consists of names only, and none is something like a picture. So it seems excessively bold to say that ordinary sentences admit of an analysis that will reduce them to elementary ones. An additional problem is that, according to Wittgenstein, ordinary sentences, in their analysed form, will consist of elementary sentences combined with one another only by means of connectives that are truth-functional. Yet our languages possess many a mechanism for producing composite sentences which is not definable in terms of truth-functional connectives; e.g. the phrases '… believes that …' and '… knows that …' are such mechanisms.

Another correspondence theory of truth is the one we find in Austin. He distinguishes between sentences and statements. In his view, when we make a statement using a sentence, there are some conventions ("demonstrative conventions") which connect the statement with a situation in the world (a fact), and there are also other conventions ("descriptive conventions") which connect the sentence with a type of situations. The statement is true iff the situation is of that type. E.g., being at home and talking about my cat, I say 'The cat is on the mat'. The demonstrative conventions connect my statement with a situation that is to do with the relative position of a certain cat and a certain mat at a given moment. The sentence I used can be used by someone making another statement, that is, talking about another cat or another mat or another moment in time. The descriptive conventions connect the sentence with the common type of all the situations that consist in a cat on a mat. In Austin, the statement, which is made through use of the sentence, is true provided we have the following correspondence between the statement and the situation that the demonstrative conventions connect with it: just as the statement is one of the statements that can be made through use of the given sentence, so the situation is one of the situations of the type that the descriptive conventions connect with the sentence. This correspondence is not analogous to the correspondence between banknotes of the same value.

One problem for Austin's theory is that it fits some sentences (such as 'It's raining today') but not others. In particular, it does not fit sentences that do not contain expressions (like 'today' or 'this cat') whose reference in the world varies with the circumstances in which they are used. E.g., if we say 'Every person has some friends', it doesn't seem that we can make Austin's distinction between a situation (which is connected with the use of the sentence in the specific circumstances) and a type of situations (which is connected with the sentence in general). (If we say 'It's raining today', what is the situation and what is the type of situations?)

A general problem for correspondence theories of truth is D. Davidson's argument to the effect that it is preferable not to accept an ontological category of facts. This argument is quite complex, and here I present it in an appendix.

2. The coherentist view about truth says, in a typical form, that a sentence is true iff it is contained in a comprehensive, broad, set of sentences that has internal coherence. E.g., the sentence 'The Earth revolves round the Sun' is true because it is contained in a broad and coherent set of sentences that concern the properties of the heavenly bodies in question, the observations that have been made of those objects, and the reliability of these observations. A set of sentences is comprehensive provided it concerns many aspects of reality or, at least, many aspects of the same topic. Variants of the coherentist view were adopted by the neo-Hegelians (late 19th – early 20th century) and the logical positivists (in the interwar period).

Some philosophers, such as B. Russell, wondered if the coherentist view puts forward a definition of truth or a criterion of it. If we want to define truth, we are seeking a feature (of sentences, beliefs, etc.) which, on the one hand, is identical with it and, on the other, is formulated without use of terms such as 'true' and the like. If we want to find a criterion of truth, we are seeking a feature f which is not identical with it, but is such that (i) all or most of the sentences, beliefs, etc. that are true have the feature f, and all or most of those that have f are true, and (ii) in at least some cases, finding out if something has the feature f is easier than directly finding out if it is true. Likewise, the characteristic spots of measles are not identical with measles, but are a criterion of the ailment. If the coherentist view puts forward a criterion, it is compatible with the correspondence theories (which put forward a definition).

Historically, some coherentists (like B. Blanshard) offered the view as a definition, whereas others (like the neo-Hegelian F. Bradley) offered it as a criterion and thought of truth as some kind of correspondence with reality. Philosophers in the latter group ought to explain why belonging to a broad and coherent set is a criterion of truth if truth consists in correspondence. Bradley's explanation was that reality is an exceptionally coherent whole (each aspect of it involves all other aspects), so coherence in a broad set of sentences is a sign that the sentences are true.

Many adherents of coherentism did not make Russell's distinction themselves, but had ended up with that view through their effort to find criteria for truth. Thus logical positivists initially emphasized that truth is correspondence, but later turned to variants of the coherentist view as they were trying to find tests with which we can check if a sentence is true. R. Carnap and M. Schlick considered that, for sentences that describe our current perceptual experience (e.g. 'At this moment, I see something blue'), we can directly find out if they are true, but we can test the other sentences only by checking them for compatibility, as well as for other logical relations, with the verified sentences of the first category. O. Neurath, going further, considered that in order to test any sentence for truth, the only thing we can do is check if it is contained in a coherent set of sentences that is also as comprehensive as possible.

Here are some problems for coherentism (viewed either as a definition or as a criterion):

(a) Coherentists ought to clarify what the coherence relation consists in. They may say that a set of sentences is coherent iff the sentences are compatible, that is, iff they jointly describe a logically possible situation. Instead, they may say that compatibility is not sufficient for a set of sentences to be coherent. Neo-Hegelians said the sentences also needed to make up a system of valid syllogisms.

(b) It appears that, according to the coherentist view, some sentence-sets that

contradict one another are true. Let's take, e.g., the Euclidean geometry and the non-Euclidean geometries. Each one is a broad set of sentences that are both compatible and organized into a system of valid syllogisms. But it cannot be that all geometries are true.

(c) More generally, the coherentist view seems to pronounce all sentences true. This problem was raised by Russell. If we consider that compatibility is enough for a set of sentences to possess coherence, we can say that each sentence is contained in a broad and coherent set of sentences. Russell gave the example of the respectable bishop Stubbs, who died in his bed; the sentence 'Stubbs was hanged for murder' is contained in a broad set of sentences that (even though no one formulated all of them together) jointly describe a logically possible situation. But even if we follow a stricter sense of 'coherent', it still seems probable that, for any sentence s, there is a broad set of sentences which is coherent in that sense and contains s.

3. The pragmatist view about truth says, in a typical form, that a belief is true iff it is useful to have that belief.

The view in question, in this specific form, presents many difficulties: (a) When we are wondering if, e.g., it is true that there is no planet beyond the orbit of Pluto, we are certainly not wondering if it is useful to believe that. Such examples show that the concept of truth is very different from the concept of usefulness. Consequently, if true beliefs and useful beliefs are the same, then either we have a strange coincidence or there is an explanation that is not obvious at all and should be provided by supporters of the pragmatist view. (b) There are beliefs that are useful but not true. E.g., people who overestimate their intelligence or, more generally, their abilities somewhat (but not much) get some benefit in their lives. Also, there seem to be beliefs that are true but not useful. What do I gain from knowing that the Andromeda galaxy is two million light years away? (c) A belief can be useful for a person or society, but fail to be useful for others. Consequently, supporters of the pragmatist view ought to accept that a belief can be true for a person or society, but fail to be true for others. Thus they are led to relativism: truth is relative to the various agents. (The phrase 'true for a person' doesn't here mean 'true in a person's opinion'. It means 'really true relative to a person'. But does it make sense to say that one and the same belief is really true relative to someone, but not relative to someone else?)

Pragmatism was a current in American philosophy in the 19th and early 20th century, but its main representatives (C. Peirce, W. James and J. Dewey) mostly didn't hold the view we have just discussed. They considered that true beliefs and satisfactory beliefs are the same, but when talking about satisfactory beliefs, they meant those that are safe from doubt, those that do not run the risk of being falsified. Still, that approach, too, presents some difficulties: (a) Indeed, true beliefs do not run the risk of being falsified, but it seems that a belief may not be true while it is not possible to find out that it is not true, in which case it doesn't run the risk of falsification. (b) It is also possible for a true belief not to be safe from doubt. For it may be true while it is not possible to prove its truth conclusively and irrevocably.

4. According to the redundancy view about truth, the word 'true', in its most basic use, can be omitted without any conceptual change: a sentence of the form 'It is true that p' means the same as the plain 'p'. The phrase 'it is true that' is a pleonasm that simply adds

emphasis. That view was advocated by G. Frege and F. Ramsey.

The question that arises is how the word 'true' functions in sentences that do not have the form 'It is true that p'. If the redundancy view does not answer that question, then it will only concern one use of the concept of truth. For example, what is the meaning of the sentence 'Everything Einstein said is true'? It does not mean the same as the conjunction, C, of all the sentences uttered by Einstein. For if they meant the same, then the statement

(1) It could have been that it was the case that … but it was not the case that everything Einstein said is true,

where you should imagine C written in place of the dots, would be synonymous with

(2) It could have been that it was the case that everything Einstein said is true, but it was not the case that everything Einstein said is true.

Then, (1) would be absurd, just as (2) is absurd. But (1) is right. If Einstein had said different things from what he actually said, C would not be the conjunction of all the sentences he uttered. Thus it could have been that he had said some inaccuracies, but still things were exactly as they are described by C. Similarly, what does sentence (3) mean?

(3) 'Snow is white' is a true sentence.

It doesn't mean the same as the plain sentence 'Snow is white'. For if they meant the same, then the statement

(4) It could have been that it was the case that snow is white, but it was not the case that 'Snow is white' is a true sentence

would be absurd. But (4) is right. It could have been that snow was white, but there were no languages and sentences (neither true nor false) and the series of sounds *snow is white* had no content.

Ramsey did not discuss claims like (3), but dealt with claims like 'Everything Einstein said is true'. He analysed them as follows:

(5) (∀P)(if Einstein said that P, then P).

Here the variable 'P' occurs twice in positions where we could write a sentence (e.g. if Einstein said that **spacetime is not Euclidean,** then **spacetime is not Euclidean**). The usual variables occur either right after a quantifier or in positions where we could write a name; e.g. (∀x)(if x is human, then x is mortal). We say that in (5) we have *quantification into sentence position.* The question what is the sense of that quantification (if it has a sense) is a difficult issue in the philosophy of logic. At any rate, to the extent that it is not clear what sense (5) has, it is not clear if Ramsey's analysis is correct.

5. The concept of a proposition and Tarski's schema:

Propositions are not sentences, but can be expressed by sentences. A sentence is made up of words; a proposition is not made up of words. The sentence 'Kant is the most important German philosopher' and every synonymous sentence in English or in another language express the same proposition: that Kant is the most important German philosopher. But there may be propositions that no language will ever express. Each proposition is a piece of information about how things are in the world, and it is true or false depending on whether the information is right or not. (For this reason, interrogative or imperative sentences express no proposition.) A proposition x and a proposition y are identical iff they constitute just the same information.

As for Tarski's schema, it is the schema

(6) The sentence 'p' is true iff p,

where, in order to get an instance of the schema, we must replace the letter p, both inside and outside the quotation marks, with a sentence that is declarative (i.e., not interrogative or imperative). Two instances of (6) are the following:

The sentence 'Aristotle is a philosopher' is true iff Aristotle is a philosopher

The sentence 'Aristotle is a doctor' is true iff Aristotle is a doctor.

Today most philosophers accept that schema (6), or at least some variant of it, characterizes the concept of truth.

6. The view that schema (6), or some variant of it, somehow **exhausts** the concept of truth is called *minimalism* about truth. P. Horwich's minimalism is particularly important:

Howrich's main thesis concerns a certain simple theory. This theory has infinitely many axioms. One axiom is that

the proposition that snow is white is true iff snow is white.

Another axiom is that

the proposition that 7 + 5 = 11 is true iff 7 + 5 = 11.

And so on for all propositions, true or false (apart from some very special exceptions). The axioms are all platitudinous. Horwich's main thesis is that this theory, together with theories about things other than truth (theories about asserting, believing, logical validity, etc.), suffices to explain all facts that concern truth in general.

For example, let's examine the fact that there is practical value in having true beliefs. (Horwich takes it for granted that that is a fact, and I think he is right. Someone is more likely to attain her goals if she has true relevant beliefs than if she has false ones.) Horwich explains it in the following manner. Let's take a belief of the form

(7) If I perform action so-and-so, then my desire for such-and-such will be realized.

Such a belief usually leads one to perform the corresponding action. But if the belief is true and leads to performing the corresponding action, then some desire of the person who has the belief will be realized. (For when a belief is true, the proposition that is the content of the belief is true; and when the proposition that if I perform the action so-and-so my desire for such-and-such will be realized is true, then according to the simple theory described by Horwich, if I perform the action the desire will be realized.) Thus if someone has a true belief of form (7), then usually some one of her desires is realized. That is why there is practical value in having true beliefs of the form in question. And there is practical value in having true beliefs of other forms because for no such belief can we exclude the possibility that it may play some role in a reasoning process that will lead us to a true belief of form (7).

Other theses of Horwich's minimalism: (i) There is a property of truth (had by some sentences, beliefs, etc.) but this property has no deeper nature or essence. (ii) The usefulness of the word 'true' lies in the fact that it allows us to endorse many, even infinitely many, propositions together, and it also allows us to endorse a proposition without knowing exactly what proposition it is. We endorse many propositions together when e.g. we say 'Every statement of the form "A or not-A" is true'. We endorse one without knowing what exactly it is when e.g. we say 'What Oscar told you is true' and do not know what exactly Oscar said. (iii) Those who understand the word 'true' are disposed to agree with claims of the form 'The proposition that p is true iff p'. This disposition can explain the use of the word (that is, the ways in which speakers use it), and for this reason we may consider that understanding the word consists in that disposition.

Although Horwich does not accept the correspondence theories of truth, he believes

that the basic idea behind those theories is correct. In his opinion, the basic idea is that true sentences, true propositions, etc. are made true by reality; e.g. the proposition that snow is white is true because snow is white. According to Horwich, the correctness of that idea is due to how an explanation of all aspects of the world would proceed on the basis of the initial conditions of the universe and the laws of nature. In the context of such an explanation, we would first explain why snow is white, and then (invoking the simple theory he described) we would explain why the proposition that snow is white is true.

APPENDIX. Davidson, in order to argue that it is preferable not to accept an ontological category of facts, used the so-called slingshot argument ("True to the Facts", in his book *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation,* pp. 41–43). Versions of the argument have been used by various philosophers with various aims.

It is reasonable to accept the schema

(8) The fact that p is the fact that q

where, to get an instance of the schema, we must replace the letters p and q with two true sentences such that: (i) each one consists of a predicate combined with one or more names or definite descriptions and (ii) they differ only in that a name or definite description **t** that occurs in the one sentence has been replaced in the other with a name or definite description that refers to the same object in the world as **t**. E.g., the fact that the Earth has a partly fluid core is (is identical with) the fact that the third planet from the Sun has a partly fluid core; the fact that the Earth is bigger than Mars is identical with the fact that the Earth is bigger than the red planet. (Definite descriptions are phrases in the singular that are introduced by the definite article but are not names, e.g. 'the third planet from the Sun'.)

It is also reasonable to accept the schema

(9) The fact that p is the fact that q

where, to get an instance of the schema, we must replace the letters p and q with true sentences that are logically equivalent. (Sentences **A** and **B** are logically equivalent provided logic teaches the equivalence between **A** and **B**.) E.g., the fact that the Earth moves is the fact that ¬¬(the Earth moves). ('¬' is a sign of negation, 'it is not the case that'.)

Let's now take two true sentences, e.g.

(10) London is in England

(11) Paris is in France,

and let's also examine the sentences

(12) Davidson is identical with (the being x for which it is the case that x is identical with Davidson while London is in England)

(13) Davidson is identical with (the being x for which it is the case that x is identical with Davidson while Paris is in France)

Since (10) and (12) are logically equivalent, according to (9) they correspond to the same fact. Similarly, (11) and (13) correspond to the same fact. Moreover, according to (8), (12) corresponds to the same fact as (13). Hence (10) corresponds to the same fact as (11): the fact that London is in England is the fact that Paris is in France. More generally — since we chose (10) and (11) at random — all true sentences correspond to the same fact!

This is the argument. (10) is indeed logically equivalent to (12) — as well as (11) to (13) — according to classical logic. Davidson uses the argument in order to engender doubts

about the existence of facts: the world contains objects, people, events, etc. but not facts. Supporters of facts may simply reject (8) or (9). But then they should tell us how, in their opinion, facts are individuated, that is, what are the necessary and sufficient conditions in order for a fact x and a fact y to be identical. Davidson's argument should be understood in the context of Quine's teaching 'no entity without identity', that is, we should not accept a category of alleged entities unless we can provide some answer to the question what are the necessary and sufficient conditions in order for something x in that category and something y in that category to be one and the same thing.