

TRUTH, PERCEPTION AND REALITY

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Early empiricists, such as Locke and Hume, denied that experience is propositional and retained the common sense distinction between experience and belief based on experience. Many modern empiricists, on the other hand, argue that there is nothing about experience that is not propositional, i.e., experience is nothing but perceptual beliefs that are aroused in us when we see, hear, smell or otherwise perceive something by means of our sense organs. The difficulty posed by this further advance of empiricism is that it wipes out the distinction between inference and experience, the latter having been regarded as the origin and justification of the former. That there is a difference between inference (understood as the outcome of an act of inference) and the state of affairs that would make the inference true must surely be allowed. An inference, whatever else it is, is some individual's belief that something is the case. So if the object of every inference is itself an inference, what we believe on the basis of inference is that we believe something or other. But a belief is something that itself requires justification. If A is a justified belief, it may serve as a part of the justification of belief B, but the same thing could be said less misleadingly by saying that whatever it is that justifies A is also a part of the justification of B. It then becomes important to determine what justifies A. If what justifies A is something other than another belief, a regress of beliefs, in which one belief (itself standing in need of support) is used to support some other belief, may be avoided. I will try to show that what stops the regress is experience that has nothing of the propositional about it, that is, what stops the regress is something that is not true or false.

I will work with a well-worn analysis of knowledge.

- A. P believes that S.
- B. P is justified in believing that S.
- C. P's belief that S is true.

Some attention should be paid to the strength requirements that are to be put on conditions A and B. Concerning A, in any definition of "knowledge," the strength of belief must be absolute. It never makes sense to say "P knows that S, but he is not quite sure that S." As for condition B, the amount of justification required in one definition of "knowledge" is total justification.

Condition A requires absolute subjective certainty, and condition B requires absolute objective certainty. A large number of beliefs satisfy the strength requirement of condition A, but it has been asked whether there are any beliefs that satisfy the strength requirements of both conditions A and B. Knowledge claims which if true are analytically true pass the strength requirement of condition B but may fail the strength requirement of condition A. A better candidate would be belief that is self-warranted and truth-sufficient. P's belief that S is self-warranted and truth-sufficient if and only if P's reason for believing that S is identical with S. Thus it has been argued that if a person thinks he has a pain, he has one, and if he has a pain, he thinks he has one. Knowledge in the strong sense seems to entail this kind of knowledge. If this kind of knowledge does not exist, it is likely that knowledge in the strong sense does not exist.

The claim that has sometimes been made that ordinary people do not have the concept of knowledge in the strong sense is dubious. If this were true, expressions like the following should never sound odd: He knows that he will not win the lottery, but there is one chance in 15 million that he will. But it seems that there are many cases in which an expression like that would sound odd, in fact I know of no cases in which an expression like that would not sound odd. The ordinary man does have this concept of knowledge in the sense that this is what he would say knowledge is if some modern day Socrates would come to him and ask the right questions. And yet G.E. Moore is right when he says that people do not use the term in this way.

The concept of knowledge in the strong sense is in some ways an awkward and useless concept. One writer has even suggested that knowledge is too primitive a concept to be worth bothering about. Perhaps it should be replaced in many contexts by some other concept. On the other hand, primitive concepts that maintain themselves in their full vigor down to the present day are not to be despised. They are often not blind prejudices, but storehouses of folk wisdom. The element of folk wisdom in the ancient concept of knowledge just might be that it has always been dimly understood that belief merely as belief is not the right sort of thing to serve as the basis of belief. Of course, if I know (in Moore's sense of "know") that somebody else believes something or other and if I further know that he is in good position to know or is an expert in the matter, then his belief that something is so will be at least a part of my basis for believing that it is so, but it is not by virtue of the fact that it is a belief that his belief is a part of my basis, it is by virtue of the fact that his belief is his that it is a part of

my basis. Even in the case of a self-warranted belief, it is not by virtue of being a belief that it is the basis; it is by virtue of being self-warranted that it is the basis.

I It is still more obvious that statements or assertions cannot in themselves be the basis for other statements or assertions. Why should a statement or assertion be the basis for anything? Thus it is surprising that statements are so often regarded as foundational. Schlick, for example, says that the foundation of all science is observation statements.¹

The analyses of knowledge can be given without using the word "true", but the analysts will nevertheless make use of the concept of truth. This can be seen by examining the alternative analyses below.

- A. P believes that S is the case.
- B. P's belief that S is justified.
- C. S is the case.

Conditions A and C give the definition of "truth" in terms of belief. In order to determine the truth of P's belief that S it is not necessary to determine whether P has any justification for believing that S. Although C is a necessary condition for truth and B is not, it is an oddity of the pure coherence theory that it keeps B and appears to dispense with C. Perhaps the pure coherence theorist assumes that A and B entail C, but that assumption would be a mistake.

The concept of truth is one that everybody has, but I am not sure that anyone has ever given an adequate analysis of the concept. What has been offered as definitions of "truth" have always been only partial definitions. Take, for example one version of the correspondence theory: If X is an indicative sentence, then X is true if and only if the state of affairs described by X is the case. The definition gives the meaning of "truth" for indicative sentences. In some versions, either the term "statement" or the term "proposition" is used in place of "indicative sentence." When this is done it is usually to be understood that a "well-formed" linguistic entity is being referred to. But linguistic entities are not the only entities that are true or false. Under a liberal admissions policy, I would admit, in addition to indicative sentences and utterances of such, at least the following: meanings of indicative sentences, what is meant by an individual uttering one of these sentences, what any object or event means to an individual, beliefs or thoughts that something is the case and perceptions. Partial definitions of "truth" could be given in terms of either of them, and they would all be correspondence theories of truth.

I If X and Y are two definitions of "truth," X is a more basic definition of "truth" than Y if X helps to explain why Y is something that can be true but Y does not help to explain why X is something that can be true. In this sense, linguistic meanings are true or false in a more basic sense than linguistic entities are. Consider the definition of "sentential truth" that is sometimes given: The sentence "S" is true if and only if S. For example, "The cat is on the mat" is true if and only if the cat is on the mat. The sentence in quotes could be false if it meant something different than it does. As Tarski points out, it is necessary to specify the language. The phrase "in language L" makes it clear that the truth or falsity of any sentence depends as much on the language as it does on the facts, but the language matters only because different languages have different meaning-rules. Given that the cat is on the mat, the sentence that says that the cat is on the mat is true because of what the sentence means. It is because of meaning-rules that meanings attach to the sentences they attach to, but this is not to say that the meanings considered in themselves depend for their existence on any particular set of meaning-rules. Almost any person (regardless of his language) knows what it is for a cat to be on the mat, and Rover will know this too if he has frequently seen Tabby lying on the mat.

Linguistic meaning is not the only kind of meaning that is true or false. Compare "The sound meant that there was a cat in the vicinity" with "To the dogs, the sound meant that there was a cat in the vicinity," and compare "The maretails mean that it is going to rain" with "To the sailors, the maretails mean that it is going to rain." In the first sentence of each pair x means that p entails p, but in the second sentence of each pair x means that p does not entail p. Let x mean that p in the sense of x means that p entails p be given the name "Meaning I," and let x means that p in the sense of x means that p does not entail p be given the name "Meaning II." The partial definition of "truth" in terms of these two concepts is as follows: If there is Meaning II, Meaning II is true if and only if there is Meaning I. For example, if to the sailors the maretails mean that it is going to rain, the maretails meaning this to the sailors is true if and only if in fact the maretails mean that it is going to rain.

My next partial definition of "truth" is in terms of thinking that something is the case. Thinks that does not entail thoughts nor does it entail a process of thinking. Above all, it does not entail mumbling something to oneself or having auditory or visual images of spoken or written language. It does not entail anything about language using nor does it entail anything about abilities that are

peculiar to human beings. These points can be illustrated by simple examples. Once I sat down in a chair thinking that it would support my weight, but it didn't. My thinking that it would support my weight was false, but, of course, I wasn't thinking or mumbling anything to myself, anymore than I was the other times when I was right. Here is another example. A man and his two dogs mistake the sound of a catbird for the sound of a cat. Although dogs do very little thinking and lack the power of speech, the dogs, no less than the man, think that they are hearing the sound of a cat. The partial definition is as follows: If x thinks that p, his thinking that p is true if and only if p is the case. Though this second definition is very similar to the first, it applies with less strain to a wider variety of cases.

My last definition of "truth" is in terms of perception, but I will first have to make a distinction between two classes of verbs, and within the first class a further division is necessary. The two main classes of verbs are cognitive and propositional verbs. The truth of a statement containing a cognitive verb entails the existence of something which the grammatical accusative is the name of. Examples of cognitive verbs are "see," "see that," "hear," "touch," "aware of" and "aware that." That "see" is a cognitive verb can be seen from the contradictory character of "He sees the cat on the mat, but the cat is not on the mat." Some, though not all, cognitive verbs are such that when they appear in statements they ascribe knowledge to the individual that the statement is about. "See that" and "aware that" are examples; an individual seeing that p or being aware that p entails his knowledge that p. On the other hand, the cognitive verbs "see" and "aware of" do not entail knowledge. Thus "He is aware of the skunks antics but he doesn't know that they are the antics of a skunk" is not contradictory.

Unlike cognitive verbs, the truth of statements containing propositional verbs do not entail the existence of something which the grammatical accusative is the name of. "Thinks that," "states that" and "expects that" are examples of propositional verbs. That "expects that" is a propositional verb can be seen from the noncontradictory character of "He expects it to rain, but it won't." Propositional verbs express propositional attitudes. Since a propositional attitude is the sort of thing that is true or false, correct or mistaken, any propositional verb can be used to give a partial definition of "truth."

The classification of verbs that fall into one of these types is not always an easy matter. With the caveat that there is much more to say, I will comment briefly on "see" and "perceive." "See," when used in connection with visual perception functions as

a cognitive verb that does not imply knowledge, but when "see" is used in a way that is not tied to vision, knowledge is normally implied. Thus, although a person may think he sees the answer to a problem without knowing what the solution is, he really sees the answer only if he knows what the answer is. "Perceive," when it is not used in connection with sensory perception, functions very much like "see" when it is not used in connection with visual perception. A person may think he perceives the answer to a problem without knowing what the answer is, but to really perceive the answer he must know what the answer is. The waters become muddied, however, when one turns one's attention to sensory perception. Does perceiving the antics of a skunk entail knowing that the antics are the antics of a skunk? Maybe, but I do not think so, and I am sure that observing the antics of a skunk does not entail knowing that the antics are the antics of a skunk. The nature of the verbal noun form, however, is much more apparent.

I If the verbal noun form of "perceive" has a propositional nature, a partial definition of "truth" in terms of it can be given. Clearly, "perception" often functions propositionally as in "His perception of the animal was that it was a pussycat," which means the same thing as "He perceived the animal and thought that it was a pussycat." I think that all perceptions are propositional and that they are propositional in the straightforward way in which it makes clear sense to say that a propositional attitude may be in error. If I am right, the following is not the report of a perception. A man is shown an inkblot and asked the question "What do you see?" "Two men dancing together," he replies. This case is radically different from the previous case. Whereas the other man thought that he was seeing a pussycat, this man does not think that he is seeing two men dancing together, or even a picture of two men dancing together. And, also, whereas the other man may have been in error, in this case it makes no clear sense to raise the question, "Is he in error?". The man's reply is not the report of a perception. What would have been the report of a perception is the answer "An inkblot."

The partial definition of "truth" in terms of perception is as follows: If P's perception of X is that it is S, then P's perception of X that it is S is true if and only if it is the case that X is S. Thus the man's perception that the object in the sky is a bird is true if and only if it is the case that the object in the sky is a bird. This definition is less basic than the definition in terms of thinks that because it is only by virtue of the fact that when someone has a perception he thinks that something is the case that perception can be said to be a propositional attitude. On the other hand, this

definition is important in another way. It establishes a link between propositional attitudes and sensory experience.

Sensory experience is the ultimate evidence for all of our knowledge of the world. I shall try to make this as clear as I can in as short a space as possible. Sensory experience is not a propositional attitude and thus not the sort of thing that could count as knowledge. But it is said that if sensory experience is to be our evidence we must be aware of it, and if we are aware of a sensory experience we are aware that it is the experience it is. Further, awareness that is knowledge. The argument is a confusion. In the first place, it is not essential that we be aware of our reasons for believing something; they may be very good reasons even though we are not aware what they are. In the second place, awareness is a matter of degree. When people say that awareness of a sensory experience is a necessary condition for having it, they no doubt have in the foregrounds of their minds sensations like pains and itches. Even with regard to them, we can get so wrapped up in our work that we hardly notice them unless they are severe. Finally, supposing that we had to be aware of a visual or auditory sensation in order to be able to have it, something that is not so, it would not be by virtue of that awareness that it would count in favor of believing something. It would count in favor of believing something because it is the kind of sensory experience it is.

A perception consists of a sensory experience and a thought that something is the case, though these components do not have to be and seldom are distinguished in the mind. The sensory experience is the direct contribution of the appropriate sense. For instance, if it is a visual experience that we are talking about, we are talking about the contribution of sight, and the contribution of sight is what we see in the weak sense of "see," i.e., the sense we use when we speak of the physical capacity for seeing or the exercise thereof. It is seeing in this sense that gives us all our visual evidence. Suppose a person sees a big rock and says that there is a big rock over there. What evidence is he relying on? It may be that his only evidence is his present visual experience. Granted, except for his past experience he would not think that he was seeing a big rock, but his past experience is not a part of his present evidence.

Three necessary conditions for the perception of objects are (1) the objects cause the sensory experiences, (2) the sensory experiences cause the thoughts that so-and-sos are such-and-suches and (3) the sensory experiences are the individual's reasons for thinking that so-and-sos are such-and-suches. The three conditions are necessary if there is to be a link between perceptual beliefs and reality. (1) and (3) (and perhaps (2)) have been denied. Godfrey

Vesey has said that it is a logical truth that if something is an X and is seen by S, then S sees X; therefore, it is wrong, he argues, to say that X causes S to see it.² The premise is indeed a logical truth, but the conclusion does not follow. To show that one thing might be the cause of another it is only necessary to show that the two are distinct, and that can be done by finding a true description of the one that does not entail the existence of the other, something that is very easy to do.

In the following passage Anthony Quinton denies that experiences can be reasons for beliefs.

Our beliefs about objects are based on experiences in a way that requires not justification but explanation. Experiences are not my reasons for my beliefs about objects--to have an experience is not to know or believe anything which could be a reason in this sense--though they may be the reasons for my believing what I do from the standpoint of the psychologist. They may, that is, be the causes of my beliefs and explain them.

This seems to be a shocking denial of the basic empirical principle of learning from experience. Unless experience can provide us with reasons for thinking and acting as we do, it cannot be our guide. Quinton admits that sensory experiences cause us to have perceptual beliefs, and they do. The man's visual experience is the cause of his belief that he is looking at a big rock, but it is at one and the same time a good reason for the belief.³

In this paper I have tried to establish links between propositional attitudes and experience and have only stated some necessary conditions for there being links between experience and knowledge of reality. The problem of distinguishing appearance from reality has not been faced. But, except for saying that the distinction is one that must be made from within experience, I must leave everything that needs to be said unsaid.

NOTES

1. Moritz Schlick, "The Foundation of Knowledge," Empirical Knowledge: Readings from Contemporary Sources, ed. Roderick M. Chisholm and Robert J. Swartz (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973), p. 430. Despite many ambiguities and seeming inconsistencies, this seems to be Schlick's final conclusion. In his very last paragraph he tells his readers that all "the light of knowledge" comes from observation statements.
2. Godfrey Vesey, Perception (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1971), p. 20.
3. A.N. Quinton "The Problem of Perception," Perceiving, Sensing, and Knowing, ed. Robert J. Swartz (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1965), p. 425.