

1 Truisms about Truth

The Conversation-stopper

Ask someone what truth is and you are apt to be greeted by either puzzled silence or nervous laughter. Both reactions are understandable. Truth is one of those ideas—happiness is another—that we use all the time but are at a loss to define. This is why the question “What is truth?” is so often treated as rhetorical.

One of the reasons truth seems so difficult to describe is that we have conflicting beliefs about it: we sometimes think it is discovered, sometimes created, sometimes knowable, sometimes mysterious. When we use the idea in ordinary life—as we do when we agree or disagree with what someone has said—it seems a simple matter. Yet the more we stop to think about it, the more complicated it becomes.

It would be nice if we could sort out, once and for all, everything we thought about truth—to find out the whole truth and nothing but the truth about the truth, as it were. Nice, but practically impossible. The thesis of this book is much simpler. Of the many things you could believe about truth, there is at least one that you *should* believe: truth matters. Truth, I shall try to convince you, is of urgent importance in both your personal and political life.

The idea that truth matters actually sums up four claims. Together, these truisms, as I’ll call them, explain what I mean by “truth” and what I mean by its “mattering.” Accordingly, I begin by introducing these truisms about truth, with an aim toward convincing you that they are just what I say they are, obvious truisms. This doesn’t mean that everyone agrees with them. As I already noted, some of us are confused about truth—we have contradictory beliefs about it. So we may believe these truisms but also believe something else that undermines our belief in one or all of them. Moreover, nothing is so

obvious that someone hasn't proclaimed it to be false, misguided, naive, incoherent, impossible, or corrupting for the young. And lots and lots of folks, as we'll see, continue to say as much about these four ideas.

Wittgenstein once remarked that the job of the philosopher was to "assemble reminders"—to point out to us what has been right there in front of our face all along. While this isn't all that a philosopher does, there is a lot of sense in this point. The very familiarity of something can make us forget, or even deny, its importance. When that happens, we need to be reminded of its role in our everyday life. This is what we need in the case of truth.

Truth Is Objective

If I know anything, it is that I don't know everything and neither does anyone else. There are some things we just won't ever know, and there are other things that we think we know but don't. Grant this bit of common sense, and you are committed to the first truism about truth: truth is objective.

Early on in Shakespeare's most celebrated play, Hamlet and his rather bookish friend Horatio see the ghost of Hamlet's dead father. Not surprisingly, Horatio has a hard time coming to grips with the fact that a dead Danish monarch is haunting the castle battlements. Hamlet's response to Horatio's worrying is brusque: there are more things in heaven and earth, he says, than dreamt of in Horatio's philosophy. Hamlet's point is to remind Horatio that he doesn't know it all because the universe is bigger than we are.

Not only, like Hamlet, are we sometimes ignorant; we also make mistakes. People once believed that the Earth was flat. Most of us now regard this as a rather silly idea. But imagine for a moment living in a time before advanced mathematics, before long-distance sea voyages, before airplanes, before photographs. Would you believe the Earth was flat? Of course you would. Just look at it, you would say, gesturing off toward the (flat) horizon.

Even well-supported scientific theories can be wrong. Seventeenth-century chemists, for example, noted correctly that something similar happens when metal rusts and wood burns. Undergoing both processes results in a loss of mass. According to the very best science of the day, the common cause was the release of an invisible gas, "phlogiston," into the atmosphere.¹ Since this gas took up space, had weight, and so on, its loss explained why both metal and wood got smaller after rusting and burning. It is easy to snicker at the phlogiston theory nowadays, since while there is a gas involved in both pro-

cesses, it is actually *oxygen*, which is gained, not lost, by the relevant system. Phlogiston doesn't exist. Yet the phlogiston theory was a very reasonable hypothesis at the time. It was highly confirmed by the standards of the day. The most knowledgeable scientists believed it. Yet it was mistaken.

The ever-present risks of ignorance and error underline the fact that whatever else it may turn out to be, truth is objective. Just because we believe it doesn't mean it's true, and just because it is true doesn't mean we'll believe it. Believing, as we say, doesn't make it so. The truth of Mt. Everest being the tallest mountain, for example, has nothing to do with whether I believe it or not. What matters is whether Mt. Everest really is the tallest mountain, and if it is, then presumably it would be even if no one had ever been around to see it. Of course, if there weren't any language-users around, then Mt. Everest wouldn't be *called* "Mt. Everest," since it wouldn't be called anything at all. But it would still be there, just as it would if we had called it something else, like "Mt. Zippy."

Voltaire once quipped that "let us define truth, while waiting for a better definition . . . as a statement of the facts as they are."² Voltaire meant this as a joke, but as working definitions go, it is pretty good. And Voltaire himself was probably thinking of a famous remark of Aristotle's that "to say of that which is, that it is, and of that which is not, that it is not, is true."³ This is even better. When we say something true, the world is as we say it is. And when we believe truly, the world is as we believe it to be. It is the way the world is that matters for truth, not what we believe about the world.

In this sense, the objectivity of truth isn't, or shouldn't be anyway, controversial. As I've indicated, it is a consequence of accepting what everyone already does (or should) admit: we don't know everything and we can make mistakes.

The idea that truth is objective is sometimes put by saying that true beliefs correspond to reality. And that is fine, just so long as we realize that this phrase leaves room for disagreement about the nature and extent of what "correspondence" and "reality" amount to. Some hold that beliefs can't be true unless they correspond to mind-independent, physical objects like mountains, electrons, battleships, and barbers. On these theories, truth is always *radically* objective, since what makes our beliefs true on such accounts is always their relationship to real physical objects. This is obviously a matter of high philosophical theory, however, and not a truism. You don't have to believe it in order to believe that truth is objective in the minimal sense I've been describing.

We don't have to know everything about something to be able to talk about it. Take, for example, the hard drive of my computer, which (I blush to confess) I know next to nothing about. I don't know what it is made out of (little bits of metal and plastic probably), I don't know where it is exactly, and I don't know really how it gets its job done. But I do know what that job is: it acts as the main information-storage facility for my computer, where it keeps the various programs and files. For most purposes, this working description of a hard drive is good enough. It picks out what we generally mean when we talk about such things. Indeed, a lot of our ordinary concepts are like this, and it is a good thing too. This is why we can talk about something like gravity in a meaningful way before we know its real underlying nature, or even if we never learn about its real nature. We know what gravity does before we know what it is.

Our basic belief in truth's objectivity is like my basic idea of my computer's hard drive. We know the job of true beliefs, even if we don't know exactly how they get that job done. True beliefs are those that portray the world as it is and not as we may hope, fear, or wish it to be.

Truth Is Good

Nobody likes to be wrong. If anything is a truism, that is. And it reveals something else we believe about truth: that it is good. More precisely, it is good to believe what is true.

Why do we find it so obvious that it is good to believe what is true? One reason has to do with the purpose of the very concept of truth itself. Humans tend to disagree with each other: we squabble, spat, form different opinions, and construct different theories. Yet the very possibility of disagreement over opinions requires there to be a *difference* between getting it right and getting it wrong. When I assert an opinion on some question, I assert what I believe is *correct*. You do the same. And when we disagree, obviously, we disagree about whose opinion is correct. So if there is no such thing as reaching one (or none, or even more than one) correct answer to a given question, then we can't really disagree in opinion.

My point is that we distinguish truth from falsity because we need a way of separating correct from incorrect beliefs, statements, and the like. In particular, we need a way of distinguishing between beliefs for which we have some evidence, or are endorsed by the Pentagon, or denounced by the president, or make us money, or friends, or simply feel good, and those that actually end up

getting it *right*. It is not that we can't evaluate beliefs in all those other ways—of course we can. We can, and should, criticize a belief for not being based on good evidence, for example. But that sort of evaluation depends for its force on a more basic sort of evaluation. We think it is good to have some evidence for our beliefs *because* we think that beliefs that are based on evidence are more likely to be true. We criticize people who engage in wishful thinking *because* wishful thinking leads to believing falsehoods.

So a primary point of having a concept of truth is that we need a very basic way of appraising and evaluating our beliefs about the world. Indeed, this is built right into our language: the very word “true” has an evaluative dimension. Part of what you are doing when you say something is true is commending it as something good to believe. Just as “right” and “wrong” are the most basic ways to evaluate actions as correct or incorrect, so “true” and “false” are our most basic ways to evaluate beliefs as correct or incorrect.

Indeed, the connection between belief and the truth is so tight that unless you think something is true, you don't even count as believing it. To believe is just to take as true. If you don't care whether something is true, you don't really believe it. William James put this by saying that truth “is the good in the way of belief.”⁴ Others sometimes say that truth is the aim of belief. This is not literally so of course. Beliefs don't literally aim at anything. But both expressions get at the idea that truth is a property that is good for beliefs to have. Since propositions are the content of beliefs, and it is the content of a belief and not the act of believing that is true, we can also say that truth is the property that makes a proposition good to believe. In believing, we are guided by the value of truth: *other things being equal, it is good to believe a proposition when and only when it is true*. Since what is good comes in degrees, we can also put this “norm” or rule by saying that other things being equal, it is better to believe something when and only when it is true. Or more loosely: it is better to believe what is true than what is false. I don't mean that it is necessarily *morally* better. Things can be better or worse, good or bad in different ways. Clear writing is an aesthetic good; tasty food is a culinary good; and believing true propositions, we might say, is a cognitive or intellectual good.

Truth Is a Worthy Goal of Inquiry

Values guide action. The value that, other things being equal, it is good to keep my promises implies that I ought, other things being equal, to try to

keep my promises. The goodness of keeping one's promises gives me a reason for acting in some ways rather than others. So too with truth: it is good, other things being equal, to believe what is true, and intuitively, this gives me a reason to do certain things; most obviously, I should, other things being equal, *pursue the truth*. The goodness of believing what is true means that having true beliefs, like repaid debts or kept promises, is a goal worthy of pursuit.

That true belief is a goal worthy of pursuit does not mean that we pursue this goal directly. The pursuit of truth is in fact always indirect. This is because belief isn't something we have direct control over. We can't believe on demand. If you doubt this, command yourself to believe right now that you have a blue flower growing out of your head. Of course, you can straighten up, deepen your voice, and chant the words "I've got a blue flower growing out of my head," but that alone won't get you to believe it, for the fact is (at least I hope it is a fact) that you don't have a blue flower growing out of your head.

Nonetheless, we certainly do have *indirect* control over what we believe, and this is control enough. I can affect what I believe by putting myself in certain situations and avoiding other situations. That is, I can control how I *go about pursuing the truth*, by paying careful attention to the evidence, giving and asking for reasons, doing adequate research, remaining open-minded, and so on. In short, in saying that truth is a worthy goal, we imply that you ought (other things being equal) to adopt policies, methods, and habits of *inquiry* that are reliable, or that are likely to result in true beliefs. We ordinarily think that it is good to give and ask for reasons, good to be open-minded, good to have empirical evidence for one's scientific conclusions, because these are methods of inquiry that lead us to the truth. If we didn't value true beliefs, we wouldn't value these sorts of activities; and we value these sorts of activities because we think they will, more often than not, lead us to believing truly rather than falsely.

So we pursue true belief via engaging in inquiry. I am using the word "inquiry" here in a very general sense. I mean by it not just the methods for acquiring true beliefs I just mentioned, but all the various processes, practices, and activities we engage in when both posing and answering questions that interest us. This obviously includes both theoretical and experimental work in the various sciences, but also more mundane activities, like the sort of diagnostic tests you might run on your car to find out the source of the weird thumping noise it is making, or when one looks under the bed for a lost sock. When doing such things, we aren't happy with any old answer. Whatever else

we might want, we want the truth about the matters that interest us. So in inquiry, one of the things we are aiming at is having true beliefs, or truth, in short.

Intuitively, our second and third truisms are closely connected: since it is good to believe what is true, truth is worthy of pursuit, of being a goal of inquiry.

Truth Is Worth Caring about for Its Own Sake

Suppose I had a machine that allowed you to experience whatever you want. Once inside, floating in the tank, you live in a virtual reality of your own design—one filled with experiences of adoring friends, marvelous adventures, spectacular food, good sex, and deep conversations. None of it would be real, of course, but it would seem to be. It could even be arranged so that once inside the machine, you completely forget that you *are* inside a machine.

There is only one catch. Once inside, you can *never come out*.

Would you do it?

Most of us will probably say no. While we certainly wouldn't mind being in the machine for a few hours or even weeks, we wouldn't want to spend the rest of our life in a virtual world. Others of us, whose actual lives are filled with tragedy and poverty, might be more inclined to opt in for the long term. But even so, most would prefer having their problems truly disappear to living a life where they only *seem* to disappear. The machine produces beautiful illusions, but we want more than illusions. We want the truth, warts and all.

Scenarios like this are found throughout history and philosophy, not to mention contemporary culture. In the movie *The Matrix*, for example, the main character is given a choice between taking two pills. If he chooses one pill, he remains in a life of perfect illusion (supplied again by the ubiquitous all-powerful computer). He will not even remember that he made such a choice. Everything will go on as before. But if he chooses the other pill, he finds out the truth about his life and reality, a truth that he is warned will be unpleasant. He chooses, unsurprisingly to the audience, the truth.

Science-fiction scenarios like this are popular partly because in thinking about what we would do in such imaginary situations, we figure out what we care about. As I'll show more fully in a moment, reflecting on these sorts of situations, at least for most of us, suggests that we care about the truth for more than just the benefits it brings us. Of course, we don't necessarily need science fiction to tell us this. There are times in all of our lives when we simply want

to know for no other reason than the knowing itself. Curiosity is not always motivated by practical concerns. Consider extremely abstract mathematical conjectures. With regard to at least some such conjectures, knowing their truth would get us no closer to anything else we want. Nonetheless, if we were forced to choose between believing truly or falsely about the matter, we would prefer, at least to some tiny degree, the former. If we have to guess, we prefer to guess correctly. And of course, we sometimes care about the truth despite extremely impractical consequences. People often wish to know the truth about a spouse's infidelity even when there is an excellent chance that nothing productive will come of it. Similarly, many people wish to know when they are dying of a untreatable disease, even if they can do nothing to prevent it, and even if that knowledge has no practical value for their actual state of health.

The fact that we value truth for its own sake doesn't mean we don't also value it as a means to other ends. Indeed, the most obvious reason to pursue true beliefs is that believing the truth can get us all sorts of other things we want. Believing the truth is practically advantageous. Imagine crossing the street; looking both ways, you try to estimate the speed of approaching traffic. In making this and countless other decisions, you need to get it right. Otherwise bad things will happen, like getting run over by a bus. Believing the truth is valuable because it is a means to other ends—sturdy bridges, cures for diseases, and safety. We can sum this up by saying that truth is instrumentally good.

Many of the things we aim at in life, from money to legible handwriting, are *only* instrumentally good. We care about them not for their own sake but for what they can do for us. Most of us believe dollar bills are like this. Having dollars is good, no doubt, but only as a means to getting other things—a house, food, clothes, and the like. There is nothing valuable about the paper itself.

Something is *normative* if it is worthy of aiming at, or caring about. But something is *deeply normative*, or a value properly so-called, when it is worthy of caring about for its own sake. Love is arguably like this. Being in love with someone isn't good only as a means to other things. No doubt, it *can* lead to other goods (sex, contentment, a richer life, etc.), but that is clearly not the whole story. People value love even when it is highly impractical, or even detrimental to their pursuit of other ends. Love is worth caring about for its

own sake. Indeed, to love someone just because it gets you something you want arguably means that you don't really love him or her at all.

So one way of thinking about our fourth truism about truth is that truth is more like love than money. We—or at least most of us—care about truth, at least sometimes, for more than instrumental reasons. Truth is deeply normative; it is worth caring about for its own sake.

Of our four truisms about truth, this is perhaps the most contentious. Yet as I noted earlier, thinking about certain hypothetical situations can help you figure out whether you believe it. So let's think more carefully about the sort of imaginary situation I mentioned at the beginning of this section. In thinking about our reactions to such situations and what those reactions show, it will be helpful to proceed in steps. The first step is to see whether we have what I'll call a basic preference for the truth. By a "basic preference" I mean a preference for something that can't be explained by our preference for other things. Avoidance of pain is perhaps a basic preference; preference for money is not.

If truth was *not* a basic preference, then if I had two beliefs B1 and B2 with identical instrumental value, I should not prefer to believe B1 rather than B2. The considerations above already point to the fact that this isn't so, however. In particular, if we didn't have a basic preference for the truth, it would be hard to explain why we find the prospect of being undetectably wrong so disturbing. Think about a modification of the experience-machine scenario we began with. Some super neuroscientists give you the choice between continuing to live normally, or having your brain hooked up to a supercomputer that will make it *seem* as if you are continuing to live normally (even though you're really just floating in a vat somewhere). When in the vat, you will continue to have all the same experiences you would have in the real world. Because of this, you would believe that you are reading a book, that you are hungry, and so on. In short, your beliefs and experiences will be the same, but most of your beliefs will be false.

If we didn't really prefer true beliefs to false ones, we would be simply ambivalent about this choice. Vat, no vat; who cares? But we don't say this. We don't want to live in the vat, even though doing so would make no difference to what we experience or believe. This suggests that we have a basic preference for truth.

Some may protest that we want more than mere experiences out of life, and it is *this* fact—not any preference for truth—that makes us prefer the real

world over the vat. So consider another scenario, one dreamed up by Bertrand Russell. Suppose that, unbeknownst to us, the world began yesterday—it *seems* older, but it isn't. If I really lived in a Russell world, as I'll call it, almost all my beliefs about the past would be false. Yet my desires would be equally satisfied in both worlds.⁵ This is because the future of both worlds unfolds in exactly the same way. If I believe truly in the actual world that if I open the refrigerator I'll get a beer, then I'll get a beer if I open the refrigerator. Since events in the Russell world are just the same as in the actual world once it begins ticking along, I will also get that beer in the Russell world if I open the refrigerator, even if (in the Russell world) I believe falsely that I put it there yesterday. In other words, whatever plans I accomplish now, I would also accomplish if the world had begun yesterday, despite the fact that in that case, my plans would be based on false beliefs about the past. Yet, given the choice between living in the actual world and living in a Russell world, I strongly prefer the actual world. Of course, once "inside" that world, I wouldn't see any difference between it and the real world; in both worlds, after all, events crank along in the same way. But that is beside the point. For the fact remains that thinking about the worlds only insofar as they are identical in instrumental value, *there is difference right now* between the two worlds that matters to me. Even when it has no effect on my other preferences, I—and presumably you as well—prefer true beliefs to false ones.

In preferring not to live in either the vat or the Russell world, I do not simply prefer that the world be a certain way. My preference involves my beliefs and their proper functioning, so to speak. For not only do I not want to live in a world where I am a brain in a vat, *I also don't want to live in a world where I am not so deceived, but believe that I am*. That is, if such and such is the case, I want to believe that it is, and if I believe that it is, I want it to be the case. We can put this by saying that I want my *beliefs and reality* to be a certain way—I want my beliefs to track reality, to "accord with how the world actually is"—which is to say I want them to be true.

Moreover, our preference for the truth is not just a *mere* preference—like a preference for chocolate ice cream. It goes deeper than that. That is apparent when I think about my attitudes toward my preference. Like many other people, I not only prefer the truth for its own sake, I also don't want to be the sort of person who doesn't—who would prefer the life of illusion. I want to be the sort of person, for example, who has intellectual integrity, who, other things being equal, is willing to pursue what is true even when it is dangerous

or inconvenient or expensive to do so. I not only desire the truth, I desire to desire the truth. I would no more take a pill that would make me ambivalent about living as a brain in a vat than I would choose to live as a brain in a vat. This suggests that my desire for the truth is not a mere passing fancy; it is grounded in what matters to me. I don't just prefer the truth, in other words, I *care* about it. Normally, the fact that we care about something is very good evidence that we find it worthy of caring about.⁶ Accordingly, if you care about truth for its own sake, then you presumably believe our last truism, namely that truth is worthy of caring about in just that way.

This, then, is what I mean by saying we can learn about what we believe from these science-fiction stories: for many of us, our intuitive reactions to these cases suggest that we have a basic preference for the truth; that this preference matters to us; and thus that we believe that truth is worth caring about for its own sake. If you prefer not to live in the vat, or in a Russell world, then you implicitly accept that where the belief that *p* and the belief that not-*p* have identical instrumental value, it is better, just on grounds of truth alone, to have the true belief rather than the false belief.

Of course, none of this proves that everyone accepts this, or for those of us that do, that we are *right* to accept it. That is what the rest of this book is about. But it does show us where we stand.

Good Ideas and Bad

So here are our truisms about truth:

Truth is objective.

Truth is good.

Truth is a worthy goal of inquiry.

Truth is worth caring about for its own sake.

This is what I mean by saying that truth matters. I mean that beliefs that portray the world as it is are good and worth caring about, not only for their consequences but for their own sake. These truisms each remind us of something essential about truth and the role it plays in our lives. They remind us that truth, like courage or keeping a promise, is something philosophers call a thick sort of value: it has normative *and* nonnormative aspects. When we correctly describe an act as courageous, we are both describing it and evaluating it. We are commending it as something to be emulated, saying it is good and

so on, *and* describing it as an action that was done despite the danger of doing it. Both are important and essential facts about courage. Similarly, when we say that a belief is true, we are at once evaluating it—saying it is correct, good, worthy of pursuit and so on, *and* describing it as portraying the world as it is.⁷ These are equally essential and interrelated facts about truth.

In defending the idea that truth matters, I'll be defending these truisms. From experience, I know that reactions to them are often as wide apart as the banks of the Mississippi River. Some of you will be saying, "well, duh" and others will be scoffing so hard their heads hurt. But in truth, these ideas are not really all that simple; nor are they hopelessly naive. They deserve serious thought, and I think they are worth fighting for. Crucially, however, I *don't* think that means that we must believe any of the following ideas, with which our truisms are often grouped:

There is only One Truth.

Only "pure" reason can access the Truth.

Truth is mysterious.

Only some people can know the truth.

We should pursue the truth at all costs.

These are very bad ideas. As it turns out, three of the more common reasons for rejecting our truisms—for cynicism about the value of truth, in other words—are based on myths that confuse one or more of these bad ideas with our truisms. Since these myths and confusions are as common as our truisms themselves, it is important to get straight on them first. In part II, I'll discuss some very different reasons for rejecting some of our truisms. These reasons are less common, but more serious. They are based not on confusions, but on bad theories of what truth is. After that, we'll be ready to tackle the really hard question: *how* and *why* truth matters.