Truth
and other
enigmas

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TO MY MOTHER

Acknowledgments

Preface

IN THIS VOLUME I have collected all but two of those of my purely philosophical essays and articles, including a few reviews, published before August 1976, that I think remain of interest. Of the essays printed here, only two, 'Realism' (No. 10) and 'Platonism' (No. 13), have not previously been published. The former is a paper read to the Philosophical Society at Oxford in 1963. The latter is the text, exactly as delivered, of an invited address to the Third International Congress for Logic, Methodology and Philosophy of Science held in Amsterdam in 1967. Together with six other invited addresses, it was not included in the volume of the *Proceedings* edited by B. van Rootselaar and J. F. Staal (Amsterdam, 1968), because, presumably in company with the other six delinquents, I missed the severely applied deadline set by the editors for the submission of the texts. With few exceptions, all the other essays are reprinted just as they were originally published, save for trivial corrections of misprints, errors of spelling, etc. The main exception is 'Frege's Distinction between Sense and Reference' (No. 9), originally published in Spanish as 'Frege' in *Teorema*, vol. v, 1975. Apart from the change of language, I have in one passage slightly altered the text. This is because, having submitted the article to the editors, I later sent them an emended version, but unfortunately too late for it to be substituted for the earlier one: the version here printed is a compromise between the two, incorporating the one change I had made in the substance of the article, but not the compressions I had carried out of various other passages.

It is not because I am wholly satisfied with everything contained in these essays that I have adopted this policy of not attempting to improve them: it is, conversely, because, once the process of emendation had been initiated, it would have been hard to bring it to an end. An essay is not, or should not be, a sequence of detachable propositions, but should have its own unity. While one is writing it, one may hack it about, deleting one passage, rewriting

another, transferring a third to a different place; but the whole process is an attempt to give expression to a view of the topic held at the time of writing. Any attempt by the writer, years later, to convert it by similar means into an expression of his present way of looking at the topic will produce only a mutilated object, representing neither his former nor his present view: he must either leave it as it stands, or write a completely new essay on the subject. On most of the topics discussed in this volume I shall probably, in one place or another, write again; it is not my purpose, in publishing this volume, to set out my present, let alone my final, views on these topics, but simply to collect together some scattered writings which have a certain unity, derived from a fairly constant general outlook on philosophical problems, and which retain, as I think and hope, some interest and value. Thus, while I certainly do not want to be regarded as endorsing everything that will be found in these essays, still less to be accused of inconsistency because a remark in one contradicts one in another, or something I have written elsewhere, I have included only those articles which still seem to me to be at least partly on the right lines and to contain something of genuine value for the discussion of the topics of which they treat.

Probably people differ a great deal in this regard. I know that I repeat myself a lot. Sometimes, when I find in a drawer something that I wrote years ago, I am surprised to discover in it some point that I remember to have made quite recently in a lecture, and which I had no idea had first occurred to me so long before. And yet I always try to avoid giving the same lecture twice, even to different audiences. Even if one's opinions on a topic have not changed—and perhaps mine change too little—a lecture, like an essay, is not just the enunciation, in sequence, of a number of propositions, with attached arguments in favour of them: it is an attempt to get a topic in perspective, by posing the questions in a particular manner and in a particular order, by distributing the emphasis in one way rather than another. If you have been thinking about a subject between one occasion of discussing it publicly and the next, then, even if what you believe to be the truth of the matter has not altered, your view of how it fits with other things, of what is important and what secondary, in short, of how it is to be approached, will have shifted. And that is how, in re-reading these essays, they have mostly struck me. I have not often thought, 'That is just wrong'; but I have frequently felt that, if I had to write about the topic now, I should pose the question differently, or start from a different point, or put the emphasis in a different place. So I have treated each essay as a completed object, to be either excluded or else included just as it stood. I did not demand, for an essay to be included, that I should, for the time being, feel

completely satisfied with it: if I had done so, there would be only two essays here, 'The Philosophical Basis of Intuitionistic Logic' (No. 14) and 'Bringing About the Past' (No. 19), in the latter of which I had returned to the subject of what was virtually my first publication, 'Can an Effect Precede its Cause?' (No. 18). I required, for the inclusion of an essay, that, from my own, necessarily biased, standpoint, it appeared to me still worth reading as advancing discussion of the subject and making points that needed to be considered. Though I hope, and, indeed, believe, that in some cases they come closer to the truth than that, I do not, by the mere act of including them, claim any more for them.

It would, indeed, have been possible for me to write, to accompany each essay, a brief comment to sketch what I now think right and what I now think wrong about it. In one case, this has actually happened: appended to 'Truth' (No. 1) is a postscript which I wrote in 1972, at the request of Professor Julius Moravcsik, to show how I felt about the essay thirteen years after its original publication, and which accompanied a reprint of it in a volume edited by him, *Logic and Philosophy for Linguists*. I have not done this in other cases, because I thought it would look sententious and be tedious. It is sometimes profitable to examine in close detail a piece of writing by someone else, when this appears both powerful and mistaken; but I doubt if many people can do this successfully or interestingly with their own work. I have inserted hardly any new footnotes: almost all the footnotes to the essays are from the original versions. There are, however, a few indispensable retractions and glosses to be made: I have preferred to include these in the remainder of this preface, rather than as new footnotes.

One suggestion which I must withdraw occurs in 'Oxford Philosophy' (No. 24), which was published in *Blackfriars*, a journal edited by the English Dominicans (hence the remark about what it is possible for a Catholic philosopher to think), and deals with the then recently published book by Ernest Gellner, *Words and Things*. This book is an attack on linguistic philosophy, and had caused a great furore and had been warmly supported by reviewers in the Sunday newspapers and similar representatives of the British intelligentsia. As can be seen from the final essay, 'Can Analytical Philosophy be Systematic, and Ought it to Be?' (No. 25), the perspective from which I then viewed contemporary philosophy is not that which I should adopt today; but I had occasion recently to re-read Gellner's book, and found that little in my earlier opinion of it struck me as mistaken. One remark, however, must be retracted. Gellner later refuted my suggestion (p. 432) that the only thing in common between those he attacked was the antipathy to them of Russell (who had contributed a commendatory foreword

to the book) by observing, quite justly, that he had attacked Moore, for whom Russell always had a great respect. My hypothesis had been only a desperate attempt to find some characteristic shared by those whom Gellner attacked and lacked by those he exempted; it was, obviously, vitiated by my having overlooked his assault on Moore, and I therefore now unreservedly withdraw it.

I ought to say that I was at no time at all happy with the 'ordinary language' style of philosophy once dominant at Oxford: practically the first thing I ever wrote, in 1951, though I never published it, was a critique of the 'paradigm-case argument', which Gellner proclaimed as the cornerstone of linguistic philosophy. I began my philosophical career thinking of myself as a follower of Wittgenstein; and, although I should no longer have claimed this in 1960, it helped to inoculate me against the influence of Austin; although he was himself unquestionably a clever man, I always thought that the effect of his work on others was largely harmful, and therefore regretted the nearly absolute domination that for a time he exercised over Oxford philosophy. I also differed from many of my contemporaries at Oxford in my estimate of Strawson's views on reference and presupposition; my objection, in the article on Gellner, to his dismissal of those views was not due to any acceptance of the prevalent belief that they formed an indispensable basis for a sound philosophy of logic, as can be seen from 'Presupposition' (No. 2), an excerpt from a review, written at the time, of articles on presupposition by Strawson and others. So some of what Gellner wished to criticise I also criticised; indeed, at the time, a friend asked me, for that very reason, why I disliked Gellner's book so much: did it not oppose views that I also opposed?

The only one of those Gellner attacked by name to whose defence I felt committed was Wittgenstein, but I think that, even if he had not been mentioned, my reaction to the book would have been much the same. To make plain why I had that reaction, and to enable any reader unfamiliar with Gellner's book to judge for himself whether my remarks about it were just, I will here quote in full Gellner's rebuttal of Strawson's views on reference. It comes in a brief section (pp. 178–9) headed '12. Differential Realism', which begins:

> This technique consists of misinterpreting other people's doctrines by systematically taking them at a different level from the one intended by their authors. The prototype of this technique can be found in the facetious remark we can make if somebody tells us 'I have the same picture at home'. We reply 'If it is in your home then it can't be the same as the one here'. In a sense we are right, but the joke is a feeble one.

Linguistic philosophers have employed this technique in all seriousness, treating it as if it were a genuine refutation, claiming that the opponents had themselves been misled into treating a doctrine true at one level as if it were also true at another.

After giving an example of this alleged 'technique' in ethics, Gellner then writes:

> Another very important example of the application of this particular technique is the 'refutation' of Bertrand Russell's 'Theory of Descriptions'. That theory offered a translation of expressions such as 'the present King of France' or 'the golden mountain'. A translation was thought philosophically necessary, given the interesting question: 'How do these expressions manage to be meaningful? They do not refer to something. There is no present king of France nor a gold mountain to which they could refer.' The logical technicalities and merits of Russell's theory need not detain us here. Linguistic Philosophy has substituted no novel answer to Russell's famous theory, it has, on the contrary, supposed that it can undercut the whole problem by pointing out that expressions as such *never* refer to anything. Only *particular employments* in concrete contexts by individual people manage to refer to things.* This is so, in a sense. If we wish to be so utterly literal-minded, it is true: expressions in the abstract fail to 'refer'. But so what? The problem of how expressions of that kind manage to refer survives *even if restated in terms of particular utterances*. The old way of formulating it was perfectly legitimate, unmisleading and indeed avoided the confusions which result from the later way.
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> * This point, buried under a characteristic fortification of scholastic distinctions, is found in Mr P. F. Strawson's 'On Referring', in *Essays in Conceptual Analysis*, ed. A. Flew, London, 1956, p. 21.

Stripped of the abuse, the argument of this paragraph runs as follows. Russell had proposed a solution to the problem how certain expressions, such as 'the present King of France' and 'the golden mountain', which plainly do not refer to anything, manage to be meaningful. The objection is raised that no such solution is required, since it is expressions as types that are meaningful, but particular utterances of expressions that do or do not refer. The ground of the objection is correct, but the objection itself fails, since the original problem still remains for the particular utterances in question of 'the present King of France', 'the golden mountain', and the like, the problem, namely, how they manage to refer. It is perplexing to me how anyone engaged in making out that a large number of philosophers systematically employ an extensive battery of dishonest argumentative 'techniques' could come to advance such an argument, and advance it, moreover, in the course of a demonstration that an alleged such technique is employed

(for once, by a named individual). It may still be asked why I singled out for criticism Gellner's attack on a position with which I did not agree. The answer is that it is virtually the only instance in the entire book of an attempted rebuttal by him of an actual philosophical argument given by any of the philosophers whom he was attacking.

There is, indeed, a genuine point for which Gellner was fumbling. Although, in his original article, Strawson stressed the issue about expressions as types as against particular utterances of them, this issue was never crucial, and for this reason was scarcely alluded to in 'Presupposition' (No. 2). Strawson was not merely dismissing the question how certain expressions manage to be meaningful, but giving a positive answer to the question in what their meaning consists; and this question arises for expressions that are not guaranteed a reference, even if they are such that, if they refer at all, they do so on every occasion of their utterance. It was therefore not Strawson, but Gellner, who had missed the point. Restricted to expressions which do not vary in reference from one occasion of utterance to another, Strawson's view of singular referring expressions becomes, of course, very similar to that held by Frege before Russell. Frege, Russell and Strawson are all agreed that, for expressions not in principle guaranteed a reference, their meaning cannot be identified with their reference, or with their having the reference, if any, that they have: Russell only very partially undid Frege's advance on the views of Mill. Russell concluded that this was possible only if such expressions were not genuine singular terms: Frege and Strawson denied that this consequence followed. The price of this denial was, of course, to admit meaningful sentences which did not (or, on some occasions, did not) express anything true or false. Given notions of truth and falsity for which this holds, one can, and indeed must, distinguish what is asserted from what is merely presupposed by an assertoric utterance: and Strawson proceeded to apply this distinction to cases, such as those involving plural subjects, in which Frege would not have allowed it. There was, indeed, another crucial difference between Frege and Strawson. Frege thought that the occurrence in natural language of sentences which, though possessing sense, expressed nothing either true or false was a defect of the language, and showed that no coherent systematic description could be given of the way it functioned: to obtain a language for which such a description is possible, we have first to purge natural language of this defect. He was therefore not committed to giving any semantic theory for a language containing well-formed sentences lacking either of the two truth-values. Strawson, on the other hand, did not see this feature of natural language as a defect: he therefore did not have the same ground for declining to extend

his account to more complex forms of sentence. Hence the request, in 'Presupposition', for three-valued truth-tables for the sentential connectives: if the conditions for the truth and falsity of certain sentences are to be given as Strawson believed, how, from these conditions, are we to determine the conditions for the truth and falsity of more complex sentences containing them as constituents? Strawson had, after all, claimed that his account yielded 'the standard and customary logic': how can such a claim be judged even for sentential logic until we know how to handle the connectives?

The question, however, that appeared to me to be central and yet, so far as I know, never to be discussed by Strawson and his followers, was whether the notion of presupposition is as fundamental as that of assertion. We expect to be able to apply the notion of assertion to some utterances of the sentences of any language whatever, independently of the details of their internal structure; should we expect the same of the notion of presupposition? Suppose a language of which we know nothing: it is intelligible to us, antecedently to any knowledge of the mode of composition of some sentence of the language, or of any other, to be told that, by means of it, a speaker asserts that some specified condition holds good. Is it equally intelligible to be told that, by means of some sentence, a speaker asserts that a certain condition obtains, presupposing that a certain other prior condition also obtains? Or would this information make sense only on the assumption of certain features of the inner composition of the sentences of the language?

The notion of presupposition is explained in terms of those of truth and falsity: so the question is what determines the application of these notions. As remarked in 'Presupposition', Strawson's use of the notion of truth can be taken to accord with a very natural principle: that whatever it is necessary for a speaker to believe, if he is to be able sincerely and without linguistic impropriety to utter a given sentence assertorically, must hold good if his utterance is to be true. This, of course, is not a definition, or an analysis, of 'true', only a guide how it is being taken to apply: but, if we also assume the converse, that, whenever everything holds good which a speaker must believe, if his utterance was to have been made sincerely and without linguistic impropriety, then what he said was true, it yields an application for 'true' of a very natural kind, though we should not assume that it is the only natural or interesting one. In particular, it is reasonable to suppose that it would be possible to apply the notion of truth, in accordance with this principle, to assertoric sentences of any language that functioned at all like our own, however differently its sentences were constructed. The notion of presupposition, however, cannot be explained in terms of the notion of truth alone; it is necessary also to invoke that of falsity. And the question

was whether there is any principle of equal generality underlying the application of that notion.

It appeared to me—whether justly or not, I am not wholly certain—that Strawson and his school tacitly assumed the notion of presupposition to be as fundamental, as intelligible without reference to internal structure, as that of assertion; and the reason for this assumption seemed to me to be that they took the notions of truth and falsity for granted, as univocal notions the account of whose application to the sentences of any language whatever could be stated in only *one* correct way. So, if Russell or Sellars believed that a certain assertoric utterance was false, and another true, when Strawson believed of both that they were neither true nor false, the disagreement was not to be explained as due to a difference in the way they chose to apply the notions of truth and falsity: at most one could be right. This assurance could hardly rest upon opinions about the standard usage of the English words 'true' and 'false': rather, it must have been presumed that there existed some uniform connection between the meaning of a sentence and the conditions under which an assertoric utterance of it would be true and those under which it would be false. Precisely what this connection was, however, was never explicitly stated: it seemed to be assumed that we all already knew it.

None of these unspoken assumptions which, perhaps incorrectly, I saw as underlying the discussion of sentences of natural language in terms of presupposition appeared to me to be sound. Suppose that one were told, of a language of which one otherwise knew nothing, that by uttering a certain sentence A, a speaker asserted that a certain condition C' obtained, pre-supposing the fulfilment of a prior condition C, while another sentence B carried no presupposition, but was used to assert that C and C' both obtained: thus, if C and C' both held, A and B were both true, if C held but C' failed, both were false, but, if C failed, then, while B was false, A was neither true nor false. From either characterisation, one would be supposed to derive a knowledge of the meanings of the two sentences, and the difference in meaning between them, via one's knowledge of the linguistic act of presupposing one thing and asserting another, or of the standard connection between meaning and conditions for truth and falsity. I did not, and still do not, see that one could derive anything of the sort. What difference in use would reflect the differences in meaning of the two sentences? In which circumstances would a speaker use the one and in which the other? In what different ways would a hearer react to the one utterance or to the other? In what respect would someone who had grasped the correct account of these two sentences, but knew nothing else of the language, be in a better position occasionally to communicate with its speakers than someone who

had got them the wrong way round, and had no further knowledge of the language? I could see no natural answer to these questions; and this suggested that presupposition is not a fundamental notion, on the same level as that of assertion, and that truth and falsity are not univocal notions whose connection with meaning is rigidly fixed for all possible sentences.

The roots of the notions of truth and falsity lie in the distinction between a speaker's being, objectively, *right* or *wrong* in what he says when he makes an assertion. Just because the notion of assertion *is* so fundamental, it is hard to give an account of it that does not take other notions relating to language, or at least psychological notions such as intention and belief, as already understood: but it is plain that, for anything classifiable as an assertion, an understanding of the force of the utterance depends upon having some conception of what it is for the speaker to be right or to be wrong in saying what he does. The simplest and the most basic principle on which 'true' and 'false' may be applied to assertoric utterances will, then, be that such an utterance is true when the speaker is right in what he says, false when he is wrong. To think that the notion of presupposition belongs to the same fundamental level as that of assertion will therefore be to think that there is a place for a linguistic convention that interposes a gap between the condition for a speaker to be right in making a certain utterance and the condition for him to be wrong. Such an utterance will bear to a presuppositionless assertion the same relation that is borne by a conditional bet to an unconditional one. But, as I argued in 'Truth' (No. 1), while, in the case of a bet, the significance of a gap is immediately apparent, there seems to be no place for any such gap in the case of an assertoric or even an imperatival utterance. On the most basic principle for the application of 'true' and 'false', there is no room for an utterance that can be recognised as having been neither true nor false: the notion of presupposition is not intelligible if explained in terms of the notions of truth and falsity, when these are applied in accordance with this principle.

Suppose that an assertoric utterance is such that it is possible, within a finite time, effectively to discover whether or not the speaker was right in what he said: and suppose that it is found that he was not right, so that he is compelled to withdraw his statement. What possible content could there be to the supposition that, nevertheless, the conventions governing that utterance were such that, in the case in question, he was not actually *wrong*? How could he have gone further astray than by saying something in saying which he was conclusively shown not to have been right, than by being forced to take back what he said? What would be the point of introducing a distinction between his being wrong and its merely being ruled out that

he was right? Or, conversely, when every possibility of his having being wrong has been excluded, what could be meant by saying that he was, nevertheless, not actually *right*? We can, of course, envisage cases in which a speaker was right by accident, for some reason that he had not anticipated, or wrong when he had good ground for what he said: but cases of this kind arise naturally, without the need for any special convention to allot them to these categories, just as do inculpable disobedience and obedience in which there is no merit, and, for that matter, bets won or lost by a fluke. The question is whether there is a place for a convention that determines, just by the meaning of an assertoric utterance of a certain form, that, when all the relevant information is known, the speaker must be said neither to have been right nor to have been wrong: and it seems clear that there is no such place.

It follows that, when it was said that, in certain recognisable circumstances, one who uttered a certain sentence could be seen to have said nothing either true or false, the notion of falsity was being understood as more restricted than that of an assertoric utterance the speaker is wrong to make; and the question then is what is the point of using the word 'false' in this restricted way. The only point appeared to be to achieve a smooth account of the internal structure of our sentences; the simplest example being that in which a sentential negation operator, when applied to a sentence *A* belonging to a certain class, yields a sentence the condition for whose correct utterance overlaps that for the correct utterance of *A*. The notion of falsity, so applied, and, with it, the notion of presupposition, then appear as needed for an account of particular methods of sentence-formation, not as adapted for any language independently of the mode of construction of its sentences: the proposal becomes the beginning of an attempt to provide a systematic semantics for natural language, as it actually exists, of the kind Frege regarded as impossible, that is, one admitting singular terms lacking a reference without denying them the status of singular terms. Its interest ought, then, to depend upon whether it can be successfully extended to a comprehensive account, covering other sentence-forming operations. The adherents of the doctrine of presupposition did not, however, appear to display any interest in such a project. It was this fact, rather than any overt declaration on their part, which convinced me that they took the notion of presupposition, and those of truth and falsity, applied as they applied them, as given naturally and in advance of the analysis of any particular forms of sentence.

'Truth' was thus intended as, in part, a criticism of the presupposition doctrine. It was a defence of the principle of *tertium non datur* against certain kinds of counter-example; not, of course, that I wanted to contend against

uses of 'true' and 'false' under which an utterance could be said to be recognised, in certain cases, as being neither true nor false, so long as the point of using those words in such a way was acknowledged to be only to attain a smoother description of the way the sentential operators worked. At the same time, it was an attack on the principle of bivalence: and this confused some readers. The confusion may be partly due to the gross inadequacy of received terminology in this area; and a few comments on how I am understanding the terms 'principle of bivalence', 'principle of *tertium non datur*' and 'law of excluded middle' may not come amiss.

There are, first, four logical laws, each stating the truth of every instance of one of four schemas, namely: (i) '*A* or not *A*', in symbols '*A* ∨ ¬*A*'; (ii) 'It is not the case that neither *A* nor not *A*', in symbols '¬ ¬ (*A* ∨ ¬*A*)'; (iii) 'Not both *A* and not *A*', in symbols '¬(*A* & ¬*A*)'; and (iv) 'If it is not the case that not *A*, then it is the case that *A*', in symbols '¬¬*A* → *A*'. (i) is always called the law of excluded middle, a usage that has to be respected, though the name would be more appropriately applied to (ii); (iii) is called the law of contradiction; (ii) does not have a received name, being, in almost every logical system, a consequence of (iii)—whether (iii) holds in that system or not—and, in every logical system in which (iv) holds, implying (i). (iv) is naturally called the law of double negation; (ii) might be distinguished from (i) by being called the law of excluded third. Corresponding to these four logical laws are four semantic principles, namely: (i′) every statement is either true or false; (ii′) no statement is neither true nor false; (iii′) no statement is both true and false; and (iv′) every statement that is not false is true. (i′) is called the principle of bivalence; the others do not have received names. I am here calling (ii′) the principle of *tertium non datur*; we might also call (iii′) the principle of exclusion and, following intuitionistic terminology, (iv′) the principle of stability. The importance of distinguishing the semantic principles from the logical laws lies in the fact, generally acknowledged in the case of (i) and (i′), that, while acceptance of the semantic principle normally entails acceptance of the corresponding logical law, the converse does not hold.

Interest in the doctrine of presupposition had led me to an interest in the concept of truth; and this, in turn, led me to an interest in the question how, if at all, it is possible to criticise or question fundamental logical laws that are generally accepted. These are interests that have remained preoccupations throughout my philosophical career. Their first fruit was a book called *The Law of Excluded Middle*, based on lectures that I had given in Oxford, that I submitted, I think in 1958, to the Oxford University Press and that was accepted by it on the advice of the late Professor Austin, one of the