TRUTH

IN

PHILOSOPHY

BARRY ALLEN

Truth in Philosophy

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Abbreviations

Derrida

G   *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

L   *Limited Inc* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1989).

M   *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

SP *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

Foucault

DP *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979).

HS *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1980).

PF "The Ethics of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom," in *The Final Foucault*, ed. J. Bernauer and D. Rasmussen (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988).

PK *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. C. Gorden (New York: Pantheon, 1980).

PPC *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977–1984*, ed. L. D. Kritzman (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988).

SP "The Subject and Power," in H. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

Heidegger

BP *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).

BW *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper &

Row, 1977) ("On the Essence of Truth" and "Letter on Humanism").

EGT   *Early Greek Thinking*, trans. David Farrell Krell and Frank A. Capuzzi (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).

MF   *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, trans. Michael Heim (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

PLT   *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).

SZ   *Sein und Zeit*, 15th ed. (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1979); *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962). The margin of the translation carries the German pagination, to which I refer.

TB   "Time and Being," in *On Time and Being*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1972). *Zur Sache des Denkens*, 2d ed. (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1976).

WT   *What Is Called Thinking?* trans. J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper & Row, 1968). *Was Heißt Denken?* 3d ed. (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1971).

William James

M   *The Meaning of Truth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978).

P   *Pragmatism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978).

Nietzsche

B   *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1966).

EH   *Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967).

GM   *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967).

PN   *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1954) (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Twilight of the Idols, Antichrist*).

WP   *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1967).

Wittgenstein

NB   *Notebooks, 1914–1916*, 2d ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

PG   *Philosophical Grammar*, trans. Anthony Kenny (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

PI   *Philosophical Investigations*, 3d ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967). References are to numbered sections of Part I or page numbers of Part II.

RFM   *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, rev. ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1978).

TLP   *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961).

What is philosophy today—philosophical activity, I mean—if it is not . . . the endeavor to know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently, instead of legitimating what is already known? . . . it is entitled to explore what might be changed, in its own thought . . . to learn to what extent the effort to think one's own history can free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently.

FOUCAULT

Contents

Prologue

On a huge hill,
Cragged, and steep, Truth stands, and hee that will
Reach her, about must, and about must goe.

<div align="right">John Donne</div>

Truth is the Philosopher's value *par excellence.* For Heraclitus, "Thinking well is the greatest excellence and wisdom: to act and speak what is true, perceiving things according to their nature." Plato's Socrates says, "I renounce the honors sought by most men and, pursuing the truth, I shall endeavour both to live and, when death comes, to die, as good a man as I possibly can be. And I exhort all other men . . . to enlist in this contest which excels all others." After Heraclitus and Socrates, after Plato and the Stoics, what distinguishes the *philosophoi* is that unlike others who claim to be wise, their path to wisdom passes through the *askesis* or discipline of truth. That, Plato says, we must "seek always and altogether, on pain of being an imposter without part or lot in true philosophy."[1]

In Plato's allegory, we begin life as prisoners chained to the walls of a cave. We see only shadows and, knowing no better, take them for realities, until our contentment is unsettled by a glimpse outside and a vision of true being. Yet the story leaves unclear what motive it is that leads the philosophical hero to escape from the realm of deception or, later, to return in order to disenchant the others. The good of all this seems to go without saying.[2]

Nietzsche was the first to draw attention to this omission. "Consider both the earliest and most recent philosophers: they are all oblivious of how much the will to truth itself first requires justification; here there is a lacuna in every philosophy . . . truth [is] not *permitted* to be

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a problem at all" (*GM*3.24). Philosophers have long wondered whether we really know the truth, but few seriously ask whether we should want it at all. What value does *true* add to *believed*? Why the privilege of truth despite opinion, despite appearances, despite the utility, pleasure, or security one may need forgo for the sake of truth? "Here," Nietzsche says, "I touch on my problem, on our problem, my unknown friends . . . in us the will to truth becomes conscious of itself as a *problem*" (*GM*3.27).

This problem—the problem of truth's value, its relation to well-being or the good—belongs to a historical discourse of truth in philosophy from Heraclitus to Heidegger. In what follows I describe this discourse, sketching its history and identifying its oldest presuppositions. My aim in this is to show how these presuppositions can be criticized and how truth looks from a perspective that does not confirm or reproduce them.

I begin with a historical introduction. What I call the classical philosophy of truth is an ensemble of four interdependent ideas in ancient philosophy (Greek and Christian) concerning truth's relation to nature, language, being, and the good. Together they define the historical discourse on truth I call *onto-logic*. The first principle of onto-logic is that the "logical" possibility of sentential truth-value derives from the "ontological" possibility of beings that "are what they are," that have an identity of their own. For onto-logic, truth is *true to* such beings; it takes its measure from what is, whose nature truth discloses.

In Part One, I look at versions of onto-logic first in Greek and Christian sources, then in modern philosophy. But it is not my intention to write the history of Western truth. The historical studies in Part One merely establish some context for the discussion of six philosophers which follows: Nietzsche and William James (Part Two); and Heidegger, Derrida, Wittgenstein, and Foucault (Part Three).

Part Two is entitled "Nietzsche's Question." As I have indicated, the question concerns the good of truth. Nietzsche was the first philosopher to take this seriously as a problem. "The will to truth requires a critique — let us thus define our own task — the value of truth must for once be *experimentally called into question*" (*GM*3.24). I discuss the results of the experiment in Chapter 3.

It is convenient to pass from Nietzsche to William James. For both, there is no impressive difference between truth "itself" and what passes for true in practice; for both, what passes for true has nothing to do with adequation to a transcendent order of Being, fixed and closed forever. We admire and evaluate as true those beliefs which enlarge predictability and facilitate action by increasing control. For James, this practical value is "the good in the way of belief" and "the meaning of truth." Yet unlike Nietzsche he never seriously questions truth's claim to the highest value, which he tries instead to reconstruct around a New World center.

Foucault takes up Nietzsche's question and sharpens it, making truth visible as a power in the political government of conduct. But I do not pass directly to Foucault. The classical harmony of truth and the good is supported by a chorus of onto-logical assumptions concerning nature, being, identity, and difference. This solidarity has to be elucidated, its presuppositions exposed and destroyed, before it is possible to consider the ethical and political questions around truth in what seems to me the right light. That is why after a discussion of Nietzsche and James in Part Two I set aside the question of truth's value and devote most of Part Three to a critical study of onto-logic.

Heidegger too is a critic of truth's onto-logic, in particular of the idea that the essence of truth is its correspondence to reality. My discussion of Heidegger in Chapter 5 can be read as a commentary on his alternative, which he summarizes in the formula "The essence of truth is freedom" (*BW*.125). The chapter on Derrida which follows begins with a look at his revisionary appropriation of Saussure's theory of signs, analyzing its critical implications for both the onto-logical tradition and Heidegger's revision of classical truth. For a reason that I explain there, however, I am not content to rest the case against onto-logic with Heidegger and Derrida. In Chapter 7, on Wittgenstein, I explain what I think is the strongest case against the interpretation of truth in terms of adequacy or correspondence. Wittgenstein is useful for this because although he did not know it his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* recapitulates the oldest assumptions of the discourse on truth in philosophy, and because although he did not understand his later work in this way it contains ideas for a fundamental objection to

the onto-logic of correspondence. This is the argument "from nature to history" mentioned in the title of Part Three.

From Wittgenstein, I return to Nietzsche's question in a discussion of Foucault. The faith that truth cannot fail to be, if not the lamp of liberation, then at least neutral among parties requires the assumption that where there is truth (the real article), a statement is made to be true by something like nature, or being, or the way the world is. As long as this assumption finds favor among philosophers we must misunderstand the relationship between the existence of truth and the exercise or actuality of power. Assume that truth's essence is "correspondence to reality," and any ethically or politically sensitive control exercised through the use of truth, or through what passes for true, must be interpreted as effects of an interfering, falsifying factor, like propaganda, ideology, or distorted communication. But the truth is otherwise. Differences between true and false do not exist apart from the practice in which these values are produced and evaluated and statements made to circulate as true, as known or probable, as information, news, results, and so on. Only here have statements currency, the capacity to circulate, to penetrate practical reasoning, to be taken seriously, to *pass* for the truth. These practical conditions situate truth amid all the major asymmetries of social power, undermining its status as a common good.

In making this argument I use the notion of *passing for true*. A statement passes for true when, whether by the authority of its source, or by formally sustaining evaluation for truth, or by any other means (for example, mass media advertising), it passes from a source to a receiver, successfully soliciting belief, penetrating practical reasoning, and thus to an infinitely variable degree modifying the subjective representation of options and necessities for belief and choice. This is an example of the effect Foucault terms *government*. A closer look at this idea in Chapter 8 sets the stage for the argument "from being to politics" with which I conclude.

I discuss the work of these six authors in the light of two philosophical questions about truth. First, what is the objection to a correspondence

theory of truth? Almost everyone has heard that there is supposed to be something wrong with this, but what exactly?

As the studies of Part One confirm, what has always been at stake in the history of this idea is the value of adequacy: Truth is ministerial, vicegerent, responsive to what is, from which it takes its measure. On this interpretation, the occasional truth in speech or thought presupposes the more originally determinate *being* or self-identical *presence* of the things whose being as they are makes truths true. Against this I argue (Chapter 7) that the identity and difference of things are as thoroughly conditioned by the historical circumstances of practice as the identity and difference of signs, symbols, or languages. The essence of truth therefore cannot not be adequacy or correspondence. For on the one hand what is said is often true, plain true. But on the other hand nothing "is what it is" regardless of the historical discourse that refers to it. So whatever "there is" when there is truth in speech, there is nothing whose nature or presence makes what we say true. A statement is not made to be true by the corresponding presence of anything whatever. Statements are not *made* to be true at all; instead, they are made to circulate, to pass for true.

This is not to say that "passing" is what makes a statement true or that "true" should be defined as warranted assertability. The only sense in which truth is "determined" is when a given statement is evaluated for truth and sustains that evaluation. Since this does not always happen on every occasion when something true is said, not all truths are "determined" to be true. Even when truth *is* determined (that is, evaluated, verified), *what* determines it (a technique for producing truth) does not "make" a statement true by endowing it with the essential true-making attribute. There is no such thing. The difference between truth and falsehood is not made by the presence or absence of a unique attribute. It is a mistake to think truth "itself" is a unit or principle of natural unity whose character (correspondence, coherence, assertability, or whatever) can be expected to enter into an explanation of why some statements are true and others not.[3]

My argument does not concern truth's essence or formal definition at all but rather its existence, to which the practical possibility of eval-

uation is indispensable. This is not the banal observation that apart from speakers there would be no statements true or false. My claim is that apart from these contingent practical conditions, *nothing else* "determines" the difference between being true or false. There is nothing more to the "determination" of truth-values than the determin*ability* that first comes with the language-game that makes their estimation a practical possibility, and there is nothing more to the truth (the "being true") of the occasional truth than the historical fact that there is an economy of knowledge in which what is said passes for true.

The way I frame the objection to a correspondence theory of truth eventually leads me to a second question, Nietzsche's question concerning truth's value. This question is independent of the first one, to the extent that a philosopher who believed in truth-as-correspondence might still raise and presumably answer it. But Nietzsche's question cannot be avoided if one frames the objection to correspondence as I do. For my argument relieves truth of a relationship to Nature and Being that has held sway in philosophy since antiquity. One cannot disturb this relationship and not expect implications for broad ethical and political questions concerning the use of truth, to which Chapter 8 provides no more than an introduction.

PART ONE

Historical Introduction

Unum, verum, bonum—the old favourites deserve their celebrity. There *is* something odd about each of them. Theoretical theology is a form of onomatolatry.

J. L. Austin

1 *Classical Philosophy of Truth*

Do you think that wisdom is anything other than the truth in which the highest good is perceived and held fast?

St. Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will* II.ix

Aristotle defines truth for classical philosophy: "to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true."[1] This seems simple, but it is important to see that it is not. The formula synthesizes three distinct and in no way obvious or unobjectionable assumptions, assumptions which prove decisive for the career of truth in philosophy.

First, the priority of nature over language, culture, or the effects of historical experience. One can say of *what is* that it is just in case there exists a *what* which is *there,* present, with an identity, form, or nature of its own.

Second, the idea that truth is a kind of sameness, falsity a difference, between what is said and what there is. In another formula Aristotle says, "he who thinks the separated to be separated and the combined to be combined has the truth, while he whose thought is in a state contrary to the objects is in error" (1051b). To be true, *what* you think separated must be *what is* separated—that is, they must be the same (the same form or *eidos*). To accommodate the priority of nature, however, truth has to be a secondary sort of sameness: according to the classical metaphor, the imitation of original by copy. It is up to us to copy Nature's originals, whose identity and existence are determined by causes prior to and independent of local convention.

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