LANGUAGE, THOUGHT AND FALSEHOOD IN ANCIENT GREEK PHILOSOPHY

Nicholas Denyer

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Volume 2

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For Lynne

Great Negative, how vainly wou'd the Wise
Enquire, define, distinguish, teach, devise,
Didst thou not stand to point their dull Philosophies?

John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, 'Upon Nothing'

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CONTENTS

1

CONTRASTING PREJUDICES

TRUTH AND FALSEHOOD

How can one say something false? How can one even think such a thing? Since, for example, all men are mortal, how can one either say or think that some man is immortal? For since it is not the case that some man is immortal, how can there be any such thing for one to say or think? That, in a nutshell, is the problem of falsehood. It, and some of its many ramifications in ancient philosophy, will be the topic of this book.

Modern philosophy does not have any problem with falsehood. It is rare to find the topic even mentioned. On the shelves beside me as I write stands my working library of modern philosophical books. It contains fourteen books with the word 'truth' in the title; it contains not a single book whose title uses the word 'falsehood'. Nor is this just an idiosyncrasy of my own. It is an idiosyncrasy of an entire philosophical culture. For a similar imbalance is displayed by the catalogue of my university library, which under the copyright laws has for centuries received copies of every book published in this country: literally hundreds of titles with 'truth', and only two with 'falsehood'.

These bibliometric facts are no accident. For while modern philosophy does not have any problem of falsehood, it does have plenty of problems that one might sum up as 'problems of truth'. Here are four that have been among the staples of philosophical discussion in recent times. There is the Problem of the External World: I have lots of beliefs about things outside my own mind; I believe that Africa is larger than Australia; I believe that Jupiter has many moons; I even have a few beliefs about the table that

stands in front of me. Each of these many beliefs implies, apparently, that there exists something apart from me and my own thoughts. Thus there starts the philosophical problem of whether there is anything to these beliefs of mine. I believe all these things all right, but might they not be uniformly untrue? Might there just not be any world external to me? Then there is the Problem of Other Minds: I believe that there are lots of other people apart from me, who also believe things, who also rejoice and mourn, who also get bored and excited. I believe all these things all right. But there is – or is said to be – a philosophical problem about whether any of these things is true. Even if there is a world external to my own mind, maybe that world just does not contain any mind apart from my own. Maybe what I take to be other people are no more than insentient robots. So once more I have a whole host of beliefs, and am in need of some philosophical assurance that there is some truth in them. Then there is the Problem of the Reality of the Past. I believe not just that there is a world outside me which contains other people. I believe also that this world has been going on for quite some time. I believe for example that the room in which I sit was constructed in Queen Victoria's day, and that just beyond it lie buildings that are several centuries old. I believe all these things all right. But what if God had created the world just five minutes ago? What if both I, and the world external to me, stocked, if you like, with people other than me, had all come into existence as recently as that? Then there would be no truth in any of those beliefs of mine about the past. Thus there has started the philosophical enterprise of giving some assurance that there is some truth in these beliefs after all. And finally there is the Problem of Induction. I not only have beliefs about the past; I also extrapolate them into the future. I expect for example that sugar will continue to sweeten my coffee, and that bitters will continue to pinken my gin. In my every waking moment I act on a thousand such expectations. Yet might they not be incorrect? What inconsistency is there in supposing that I expect all these things, that the past has indeed been as I take it to have been, and that nevertheless these expectations are untrue? Might not my next cup of coffee turn sour when I add the sugar, and my next pink gin be bright green instead? The pattern is the same as in the three other cases we have discussed: a whole set of beliefs, and a philosophical problem about what truth, if any, they have. The idea behind much modern philosophy is, in

short, that beliefs are guilty until proved innocent, untrue until proved true.

Ancient philosophy is different. You can read an awful lot of Plato and Aristotle without ever encountering any of our four Problems. But you cannot read far without encountering the twin prejudices that, to say the least, by and large our beliefs are true, and that falsehood is of necessity a rare and somewhat problematic occurrence. This is not to say that Plato and Aristotle uniformly succumbed to those prejudices; for on the contrary, Aristotle thinks error perfectly possible, and Plato thinks it widespread. Nor is this to deny that some modern philosophers hold the view that falsehood is of necessity rare. The difference is that among modern philosophers that view is no mere prejudice, but the conclusion of a long and sophisticated argument, an argument of the sort that they would not dream of giving for the conclusion that some beliefs are false.[1] Plato by contrast devotes considerable philosophical skill and energy to showing that, and explaining how, we can make false statements and have false beliefs. Aristotle does not spend much time on this task; he is prepared to accept that Plato has done the job correctly. Nevertheless, Aristotle too provides an instructive contrast with the attitude of modern philosophers. For, as we will see, many of his most characteristic problems, doctrines and methods rely on the scarcely examined assumption that falsehood is rare.

REALISM AND IDEALISM

This contrast between ancient and modern prejudices about truth and falsehood has several consequences. One of the most interesting concerns Idealism and its opposite, Realism. Idealism is the doctrine that – to put it crudely – there is nothing apart from 'ideas' (perceptions and thoughts), save perhaps for the minds or spirits which have them, and that other things, like shoes and ships and sealing wax, will in the last analysis turn out to be nothing but ideas, if they turn out to be anything at all. Throughout much of ancient philosophy, Idealism is simply not an option.[2] It is not just that people do not defend Idealism. The point is rather that they do not even attack it. There is a tradition of intensive philosophical inquiry, which sometimes gives the impression of leaving no avenue unexplored, however unpromising. Ancient philosophers can be found to maintain that nothing

moves, that planets are gods, that a virtuous man will be happy on the rack, that each human soul has existed for all eternity, and that the way to live a happy life is to live without believing anything at all, not even that this is the way to live a happy life. Ancient philosophers cannot be found who maintain, or even take trouble to deny, the doctrine of Idealism.

Things are different for modern philosophers. Idealism is an option now. Even those who do not accept Idealism are in the position of rejecting it consciously, and after argument, as ancient philosophers never were. Furthermore, many who claim to reject Idealism offer alternatives which owe much to what they claim to reject. A good deal of what is offered as Realism seems hardly to deserve that title. A common pattern in modern philosophy has been to begin by thinking that some form of Idealism is quite unchallengeably correct; and then go on to declare that ordinary thought and life can nevertheless continue undisturbed, on the grounds that the apparently Realist assumptions on which they are conducted are not after all in conflict with a truly philosophic Idealism. The most explicit example of this pattern has been Kant, with his contrast between the empirical and the transcendental: some form of Idealism is true, but the Realism of ordinary life is not therefore false; for the Idealism that is true is transcendental, and the only Realism which ordinary life requires is empirical. Kant, as I say, is explicit about it. I often feel that later philosophers take a similar line, if less explicitly. Philosophers who purport to accept the Realism of everyday life, and who do not openly endorse any brand of Idealism, often seem to insinuate nevertheless that the Realism of everyday life is something slight, and incapable of contradicting philosophical Idealism. Other philosophers will no doubt have examples of their own; but my favourite examples of this are the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations* and some of his followers. When, for example, I am told that God has an objective existence that is guaranteed by our playing the appropriate language game, then I am inclined to feel that 'objective existence' of this sort is little more than being merely a figment of our imagination.

Be that as it may, ancient attitudes to Idealism stand in stark contrast to those of modern times. And this contrast is, I suggest, of a piece with our earlier contrast between ancient and modern attitudes to truth and falsehood. Start with what I have said is the characteristic modern prejudice about truth and falsehood. Accept

that nothing could be easier than for us to have all the beliefs that we do, even though there is no world outside them to which they correspond. Be convinced nevertheless that our beliefs cannot be as badly wrong as that would seem to imply. But do not take this conviction to cast doubt on your prejudice about truth and falsehood. For your prejudice is too deeply rooted to be cast in doubt, even by that conviction. You will then start to find plausible the thought that our beliefs can be true even though there is nothing outside them to make them true, the thought that all the things in which we believe are really no more than our own ideas. You will then start to be an Idealist. If instead your prejudices about truth and falsehood are more ancient than modern, you will not dream of taking such a course. You will remain an unthinking Realist, as the ancients characteristically did.

A DIFFICULTY

This contrast in prejudices between ancients and moderns presents me with a difficulty. If modern philosophical problems are typically problems of truth, how can I expect to interest modern readers in the problem of falsehood? Their first reaction will be perhaps that whatever else is problematic, falsehood certainly is not. That reaction is, in a way, perfectly correct, and nothing in this book denies it. Indeed, one thing I will do in this book is explore how Plato solved, once and for all, the problem of how we can assert without paradox that someone has adopted a false belief or uttered a false statement. Plato's solution is definitive, and the fact that people have not subsequently been much bothered by the problem is a mark of how definitive Plato's solution is. But for all that falsehood is actually unproblematic, it is still worth our while to examine the philosophy of those who felt otherwise. This is for several reasons.

First, the very fact that falsehood itself is now unproblematic poses us other problems: why did an intelligent and hardworking philosopher take such efforts to show how, in spite of all, one can say and think falsehoods? What did he presuppose, which made such efforts seem needed? And what do we presuppose instead, which makes such efforts seem unnecessary? These presuppositions, as we uncover them, will seem strangely mismatched. The presuppositions which create the problem of falsehood will look to

us quite bizarre, as bizarre as the problem which they create. The presuppositions which stop us finding falsehood problematic will by contrast look to be the merest truisms, as truistic as the fact that people very often make mistakes. This mismatch should warn us that our 'truisms' have a great deal of philosophical bite to them, and that they are not quite so bland as they look.

The problem of falsehood is worth exploring for a second reason. It is that our explorations will provide a case history of philosophical progress. It can often look as if philosophy never advances. It is difficult to come up with a pat and cogent answer when challenged to give examples of questions that philosophy has solved. In part, of course, as has often been pointed out, this is just another case of the 'treason never prospers' syndrome. As the old epigram reminds us:

> Treason doth never prosper: what's the reason?
> For if it prosper, none dare call it treason.

Somewhat similarly, once questions have been answered, then often enough they are no longer classified as philosophical, but as belonging to some other discipline instead. That can sometimes be how another discipline starts: witness the history of what was once called natural philosophy. But the problem of falsehood is different. There is no discipline other than philosophy which now lays claim to that problem and to its solution. This is because the philosophical questions that subsequently become part of another discipline are those that remain readily comprehensible even once they are solved: we do not have much difficulty in continuing to understand the questions 'What causes eclipses?' and 'Why does the moon shine?', even after they have ceased to be part of philosophy and become part of astronomy instead. That is not so with the question 'How can one say something if it isn't true, and thus isn't there to be said?' A considerable exercise of the philosophical and historical imagination is needed before we can begin to sympathise with the frame of mind in which that seems a genuine question. It is therefore very easy to neglect such questions and the solutions that have been found for them, when we ask what progress in philosophy is like and whether it ever takes place. And because answering such questions is a sort of progress that is so easily neglected, it is all the more important to have a case of it examined in some detail.

There is third reason for looking at the problem of falsehood. It