# Truth Problems

The concept of truth seems to sit quietly at the heart of philosophy, acting both as the aim of the whole subject, and as the criterion for its success. In ancient and early modern times this quiet was only disturbed by a few relativists who entirely denied the existence of truth, replacing it with many subjective points of view. Sceptics usually acknowledged truth's existence, but denied that we could ever attain it. More recently the spotlight has been turned on the very idea of truth. It is now a key topic in philosophy, and a distinctive group of problems have emerged.

As so often, the concept of truth seems obvious until it is closely scrutinised. Is truth in the world, or in our minds? If it is in our minds, in what sense is it true of things outside the mind? The obvious response is that truth relates what is in the mind to what is outside it, in a way we consider successful or accurate. If so, then we wonder what in our minds forms this relationship, what aspects of reality this relates to, and what is the nature of the relationship.

The first part of the puzzle is the nature of **truth bearers** within our minds. At various times a considerable array of candidates has emerged for this role. At first it seemed that thoughts or ideas are the truth bearers, but in modern philosophy there has been more focus on the sentences we utter. Those who favour the world of thought for truth bearing are divided between propositions and beliefs, though even concepts might bear truth (if we compare 'cow' and 'dragon'). Since a thought might be true even if we only entertained it, rather than believing it, propositions tend to be favoured for the role more than beliefs.

The propositions within our minds are rather vague entities which are not always accurately expressed, so thinkers aiming for more rigour about truth (especially logicians) tend to focus on sentences as the truth bearers. Logic can then be seen as the tool for preserving truth, as we move our focus from one sentence to another. However, we can't ask whether 'it is raining' is true without a context, so a further proposal for the linguistic view of truth bearers is that they are utterances, with a time, a place, and a speaker, rather than timeless sentences. Most students of truth are divided between propositions and utterances as the bearers of truth. A background question to this debate is whether the concept of truth is relevant to the thinking of animals (who lack language). The actual theories of truth differ over the contents and relations of truth, but the problem of what bears truth is common to every theory.

Given some truth bearers, the big aim is to know the nature of truth, which usually invites an attempt at **definition**. A series of famous attempts at this have given us the correspondence, coherence, pragmatic and identity theories of truth. Occasionally thinkers have observed the elusive nature of truth, and treated it as a primitive – a self-evident concept which can be used successfully without a definition or further information about it.

In the face of these difficulties of definition, attention was turned to a traditional problem with truth which had confused everybody. If I say to you 'this sentence is not true' would you be happy to believe me? A little thought should lead you to the horrible realisation that if you think the sentence is true, then the correct response is to not believe it. But if you don't believe it, that means you should believe it, and you are trapped in the paradox of **the Liar**. The study of this problem led to a proof that it is actually impossible to define 'true' from within the language which employs it, and one must step outside the language (into a 'meta-language') to have any chance of success. The result was new definitions of truth confined within a hierarchy of languages, and truth began to look like a rather trivial concept, or even one we could eliminate from our language.

When truth was understood 'robustly', as relating our minds to the world, the question of its **value** was often visited by philosophers. When disputes about religion became heated, claims to have attained the Truth, and assertions of its supreme value, were commonplace. Its main rival as the supreme value was moral goodness, and it might even be that the two are (in some way) intertwined. More recently this supreme value of truth has been questioned. We see that lies and delusions sometimes help us to get through life, and that powerful social groups can get a monopoly on what is considered to be true. Truth may even be an entirely social creation. Modern logicians, if they value truth at all, tend to see it as just a conversational shorthand, used to endorse other sentences (as when I say 'that's true'). In science truth is often marginalised by more immediate aims, such as good explanation, or successful prediction, or accurate fit with the data. These aims usually come in degrees, rather than being all-or-nothing, but we can also think of truth in this way. We acknowledge degrees of truth, or partial truth, or approximations to the truth, or progress towards the truth, which all fall within the concept of **verisimilitude**.

If idealists pursue and endorse a single idea of Truth, and extreme relativists entirely deny the existence of truth, might there be something in between? We assume that all truths are consistent with one another, and this suggests a single huge system containing all possible mutually consistent truths. This would in effect be one huge and unique Truth. But might there be perfectly good truths which exist in isolation from one another? Students of language and models in logic suggest that truth only exists within some system of thought, and so rival systems might work well, and encompass vast truths, without ever being comparable. This is to **relativise** truth, without embracing full relativism.

It is neat and tidy to assume that all assertions are either true or false, which is the 'bivalent' view that there are just two truth values. However, in some cases we seem to meet **gaps** in truth value; if we say 'he is bald' there are clearly true and clearly false cases, but in the middle there is vagueness. More drastically, we might find truth-value **gluts**, as when 'yes and no' is a perfectly good answer to a question, and truth seems to overlap with falsehood. We have accepted 'false' as being the simple opposite of 'true', but maybe it is a different type of concept. If someone doesn't understand when a sentence is not true, we would not think they understood 'true', but while 'true' is an attractive concept that illuminates some aspect of reality, 'false' seems a bit murky, and doesn't connect to anything.

In the modern world claims for truth are often greeted with scepticism, and our confidence has been undermined by truth's involvement in social pressures, multiple versions of logic, varieties of natural and formal languages, and deep paradoxes. Our attitude to the problems of truth has a major impact on our attitude to philosophy as a whole.