Pilate's ploy
Taking sides in the Truth Wars
The attractions of walking away
Losing our grip on the conversation
More Bacon

RIHSS Key Concepts Lecture Series 2006

"Truth"

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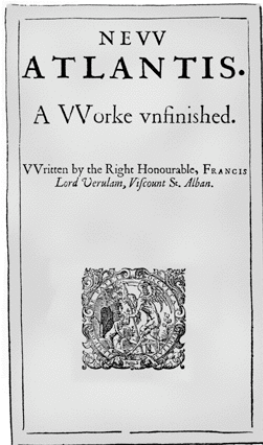More Bacon

Bacon
Nietzsche
Austin
Blackburn

'What is truth?' said jesting Pilate,
and would not stay for an answer.

– Francis Bacon (1561-1626), 'On Truth'.

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More Bacon

Bacon
Nietzsche
Austin
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The noble scorn of a Roman, before whom the word 'truth' was shamelessly mishandled, enriched the New Testament with the only saying in it that has any value ... "What is truth?"

– Nietzsche, 'The Antichrist' (1895).

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More Bacon

Bacon
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*'What is truth?' said jesting Pilate,
and would not stay for an answer.
Pilate was in advance of his time. For
'truth' itself is an abstract noun, a
camel ... of a logical construction,
which cannot get past the eye even
of a grammarian. ... Philosophers
should take something more nearly
their own size to strain at. What needs
discussing rather is the use ... of the
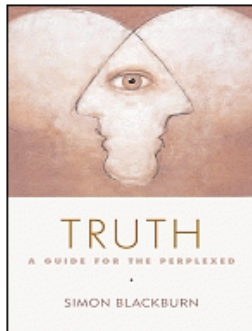word 'true.'*

– J. L. Austin, 'Truth' (1950).

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The attractions of walking away
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More Bacon

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"Suppose truth is, as it were, too **small** *to sustain the battle. This is the beginning ... of the first truce in the Truth Wars, ... the first intimation that whichever side we were on, we may have been fighting phantoms."*

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Two questions
Correspondence
Coherence
Pragmatism
Summary: how the teams line up

Introducing the Truth Wars . . .

Two issues about truth:

1. What *kinds* of things can be true?
2. What does it *take* for one of these things to be true?

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More Bacon

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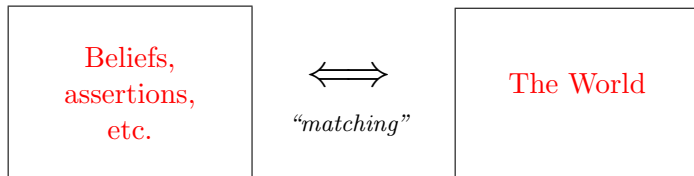First question: What *kinds* of things can be true?

- Beliefs, assertions, claims, statements, propositions . . .
- Example: "The **belief** that we're in Sydney is true" "The **assertion** that we're in Sydney is true" "The **claim** that we're in Sydney is true" "The **proposition** that we're in Sydney is true"

Second question: What does it *take* to be true?

- This is where the controversy starts . . .

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More Bacon

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Truth as "correspondence"

A natural idea: truth is some sort of "correspondence", or "matching" between thoughts (or words) and the world.

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More Bacon

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Problems with correspondence

1. What is this "correspondence"? We have some idea how *pictures* can "match" the world, but *words* and *thoughts*?

2. Lots of different kinds of things can be true (e.g., in science, maths, law, art, ethics, . . .). Is it the same kind of matching for all of them?

3. How could we know about it? (We check our beliefs against other beliefs, not against the world.) So doesn't it make truth *inaccessible,* at least to mortals like us?

4. Why should we care about it?

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Taking sides in the Truth Wars
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More Bacon

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Truth-as-correspondence:

> *. . . the Enlightenment's version of the religious urge to bow down before a non-human power.*
>
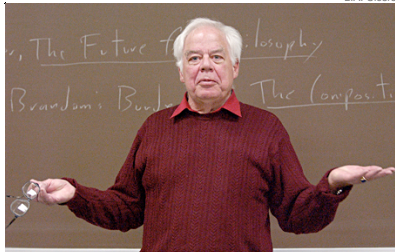> *. . . just another of the obsequious Names of God.*
>
> – Richard Rorty.

Stanford Report, April 13, 2005

Philosopher Richard Rorty asserts notion of mind/body distinction is false

BY BARBARA PALMER

L.A. Cicero

Richard Rorty, a philosopher and professor of comparative literature, said that the use of visual perception as a metaphor for knowledge led to a picture of an inner space, a "Cartesian theater," inhabited by things called ideas, impressions and mental representations, which led to "bad" questions, such as, "What is the relationship between what's out there and what's in here such that we can know what's really out there?"

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Truth as "coherence"

What we do seem to care about is how our claims and beliefs "cohere" with one another – if we argue for the truth of a claim, we support it with other claims.
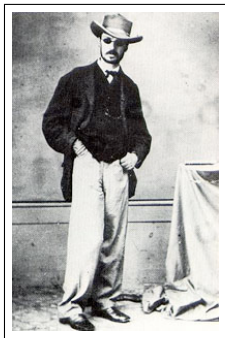
This suggests the idea that beliefs and claims are true if they cohere in the right way with other beliefs.

Advantage: Accessibility – coherence is an "internal" virtue.

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The attractions of walking away
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More Bacon

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Problems with coherence

- It seems *too* internal, *too* subjective.

- Couldn't our system of beliefs be thoroughly *coherent,* thoroughly *self-consistent,* but still completely *wrong?*

- Wittgenstein: "If what seems right is right, that just means we can't talk about 'right'"

- The dark side of relativism – "anything goes". ("When anything goes, nothing stays.")

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The attractions of walking away
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More Bacon

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Truth as what works

The true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief.

'The true', to put it very briefly, is only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as 'the right' is only the expedient in the way of our behaving. Expedient in almost any fashion . . .

– William James, 'Pragmatism' (1907).

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More Bacon

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Problems with pragmatism

- False beliefs can be useful. (Blackburn's example: it may be *useful* to believe that you are the most popular person in the class, but that doesn't make it *true.*)
    - Lots of truths are *useless* – of no pragmatic value whatsoever – e.g., probably, the truth about the cause of death of the very last dinosaur.

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More Bacon

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Taking sides in the Truth Wars

Team Absolutist

STAR PLAYERS: Socrates, Plato, Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes, Russell, Moore, Thomas Nagel, . . .

CREDO: Truth is an *objective* standard for human thought.

Team Relativist

STAR PLAYERS: Protagoras, Hobbes, Nietzsche, William James, Foucault, Derrida, Rorty, . . .

CREDO: Truth is a *subjective* achievement, on a human scale.

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More Bacon

Frege's transparent truth
Ramsey's redundancy theory
Blackburn's 'minimalism'

*It is worth noticing that the sentence
"I smell the scent of violets" has just
the same content as the sentence "It is
true that I smell the scent of violets".
So it seems . . . that nothing is added
to the thought by my ascribing to it a
property of truth. . . . May we not be
dealing here with something which
cannot be called a property in the
ordinary sense at all?*

– Gottlob Frege (1918).

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More Bacon

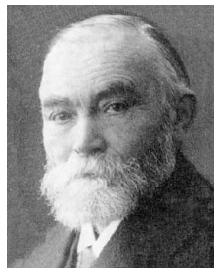Frege's transparent truth
Ramsey's redundancy theory
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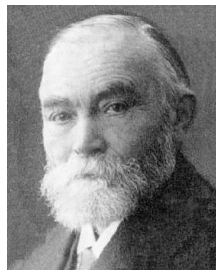
Blackburn's gloss of Frege's idea:

> *It is as though you could always look*
> *through "it is true that" to identify the*
> *content judged, inquired after, and so*
> *on,* **as if the reference to truth**
> **was not there.**

(i.e., truth is "transparent").

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Losing our grip on the conversation
More Bacon

Frege's transparent truth
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There is really no separate problem of truth but merely a linguistic muddle.

It is evident that "It is true that Caesar was murdered" means no more than that Caesar was murdered, and "It is false that Caesar was murdered" means that Caesar was not murdered.
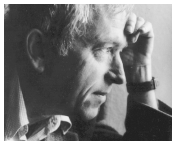

– F. P. Ramsey (1927).

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Taking sides in the Truth Wars
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More Bacon

Frege's transparent truth
Ramsey's redundancy theory
Blackburn's 'minimalism'

Both the relativist and the absolutist are impressed by Pilate's notorious question 'What is Truth?', and each tries to say something useful at the same high ... level of abstraction. The minimalist can be thought of as turning his back on this abstraction.

If the issue is whether high tide is at midday, then truth consists in high tide being at midday. If the issue is whether Blair is a fantasist, the truth lies in Blair being a fantasist or not. ... The point is to discourage us from looking for anything more general.

– Simon Blackburn.

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The attractions of walking away
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More Bacon

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Blackburn's recipe for peace

- Accept that "It is true that P" means nothing more than "P".
- Give up looking for a general theory of truth – a general answer to Pilate's question, "What is truth?"
- Walk away.

Next: Why this is a recipe for disaster ...

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Losing our grip on the conversation
More Bacon

Two kinds of examination
Conversation as a test of knowledge
Making conversation "tacky"
Truth as convenient friction

Two kinds of examination

1. The exam as *testimony.*

    AIM: Don't say that P unless you believe that P.

2. The exam as *test of knowledge.*

    AIM: Don't say that P unless P.

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More Bacon

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Example

Suppose I believe that Aristotle was a Belgian. Consider how I fare on the following examinations:

1. The exam as *testimony.*
   - Q1 Was Aristotle a Belgian? | YES | ✔

2. The exam as *test of knowledge.*
   - Q1 Was Aristotle a Belgian? | YES | ✗

A crucial difference: The second kind of exam presupposes an **objective** way of being right or wrong.

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More Bacon

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Two kinds of conversation

1. Conversation as *testimony.*

    AIM: Just say what you believe.

2. Conversation as a *test of knowledge.*

    AIM: Don't say that Aristotle was a Belgian unless Aristotle actually was a Belgian.

Which kind do we have? The second kind!!

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More Bacon

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Conversation-as-testimony in action:

> ME: "Aristotle was a Belgian."
>
> YOU: "That's interesting! Aristotle wasn't a Belgian, and neither was Plato."

Notice that our disagreements "slide past one another" – if we both think that the other is *sincere,* then we both think that the other is *right,* by the only standards available.

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Taking sides in the Truth Wars
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More Bacon

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Making conversation "tacky"

QUESTION: What do we need to make disagreements "grip"?

ANSWER: We need another kind of conversational "norm", as well as *sincerity.* We need the assumption that our claims have to meet an **objective** standard of right and wrong.

> ME: "Aristotle was a Belgian."
>
> YOU: "That's not **right**! He was a Greek, like Plato." "That's not **true**! He was a Greek, like Plato."

And this kind of "rightness" is just truth ... but not Blackburn's "transparent" kind of truth!

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More Bacon

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Does this mean we have to go back to the old question, the old choices – correspondence, coherence or pragmatism?

Not necessarily!

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More Bacon

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A new way to think about truth?

- Think of conversation as a game invented by our ancestors.
- **The crucial rule:** when we disagree with someone, we can challenge, by saying "That's **wrong**!" (even if we think they are *sincere*).
- We score points when someone agrees with us – when they say "That's **right**!" – and that gives us an incentive to offer *reasons* for our beliefs.

My suggestion: We explain the most puzzling things about truth by seeing that this is the kind of game we actually play.

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The attractions of walking away
Losing our grip on the conversation
More Bacon

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Cease-fire in the Truth Wars?

This solution offers something to both sides:

- The game requires that we *treat* truth as objective – no one wins just by *believing* that they've won. (In this sense, the absolutists are right.)

- But we don't need to be gods to play it – we always base our challenges on our own beliefs. (In this sense, the relativists are right.)

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More Bacon

The game of the gods
The daughter of time

It is a pleasure, to stand upon the shore, and to see ships tossed upon the sea; a pleasure, to stand in the window of a castle, and to see a battle, and the adventures thereof below: but no pleasure is comparable to the standing upon the vantage ground of truth . . . and to see the errors, . . . in the vale below.

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More Bacon

The game of the gods
The daughter of time

In modern translation:

> *Harbour views are great; so is
> watching the football: but nothing
> beats knowing that you're right and
> the other guy is wrong!*

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More Bacon

The game of the gods
The daughter of time

Conclusions

- The pleasure Bacon is describing is a pleasure we humans have invented for ourselves ... a pleasure available to us because we play a particular kind of conversational game.

- This explains both why it *seems* a transcendent pleasure, a god-like achievement; and why we don't *actually* have to be gods to enjoy it.

- (And it is a much more useful myth than the gods themselves!)

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More Bacon

The game of the gods
The daughter of time

Men have been kept back as by a kind of enchantment from progress in the sciences, by reverence for ... the authority of men accounted great in philosophy.

It shows a feeble mind to grant so much to authors, and yet deny Time his rights, who is the author of authors, nay, rather of all authority.

Rightly is Truth called the Daughter of Time.