

Criteria of Truth*

If a person in a state of doubt seeks to know the truth, then his first task is of necessity to remove the doubt, or in other words to find means of securing that which is recognized as true against the encroachments of doubt. Such is the task of him who seeks to know the criteria of truth, and there are no hard-and-fast rules for performing this task, since the problem differs under differing circumstances, each problem having a different solution in an ascending scale of difficulty. I shall attempt here to dispose cursorily of the easier manifestations of this problem (since they are frequently discussed), in order to be able to dwell at greater length on the more difficult ones.

In the realm of visible (and audible) things the question "What is truth?" is relatively easy to answer. If I ask whether an object is in a certain place or whether a plant has a red or a blue flower, the answer is likely to be "Go and see for yourself". And if the object is not within my range of vision I shall have to walk to it in order to see it. But in any event the act of looking will convince me of the truth one way or the other. If, however, the act of looking is not possible (for example, if the object is too far away for me to go and see), then I must trust to the evidence of another, and if necessary have this evidence confirmed by the evidence of yet a third person. This situation is what Goethe had in mind when he wrote in his poem "Vermächtnis" "You must trust your senses, which will not let you observe anything that is false". Perception is reliable only insofar as it is confined to [27/28], that which offers itself to the senses and refrains from any interpretation over and above that. This is not always as easy as it seems, since perception is always governed by understanding, and may indeed be led astray by an erroneous or superficial understanding. In such a case it is a new and often far from simple task to exclude the error and reveal the perception in its original purity. Goethe again seems to have had this in mind also when he added the cautionary clause "which will not let you observe anything that is false if your understanding keeps you awake". One objection that is often raised to the reliability of sensual perception is that we are all subject to delusions, such as the mirage of an oasis which so often torments the thirsty traveller in the desert, or the "trompe-l'oeil" so beloved of baroque architects (Borromini's colonnade in the Palazzo Spada in Rome is a case in point: an illusion of great extent is achieved by a cunning shortening of perspective). But this is not really a justified objection, since the illusion can still be dispelled by simply going to have a closer look. It is only an exception within a framework of regular patterns and can be entirely dispelled within this framework. And even if the individual observer continues to be in doubt, he can still call upon another for confirmation of his perception. We must hold firmly to the principle that sensual perceptions are always subject to confirmation by a second observer.

But not everything - not even everything within the sphere of visible things - can be decided by simply "having a look". It is not possible to find out by merely looking at it whether an appliance is suited to a certain purpose or whether a machine is working properly. In such cases you have to try it out, which brings us to the pragmatic concept of truth. In its simplest form this concept says that the success of an action is an indication of the Tightness of the assumptions made in carrying it out. Or, to put it in the form of a gross oversimplification: What is useful is true.

This concept of truth has its appropriate realm of applicability in the world of craftsmanship

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and technology, with its underlying assumptions of a rational relationship between ends and means. It becomes debatable when it is applied in a more general (and hence of necessity less precise) sense to life as a whole, as is the case, for example, in Nietzsche. By truth he understands quite generally that which is appropriate to the [28/29] existence of man (XI 186) or to the preservation of humanity (XII 41). The trouble with this definition is that quite apart from the difficulty in deciding on success in such general cases as these there is the more fundamental problem that "preservation of humanity" is far too indeterminate a concept for any determined criteria to be derived from it, and can at best only be understood as a minimal definition.

Hence Nietzsche arrives at the well-known provocative formulation "Truth is that kind of error without which a specific kind of living being could not live" (XVI 19). But this reduces truth to a mere fiction and makes the medically unfounded belief of the sick man that he is recovering because he is "life-promoting" into a truth. It is obvious that in this way the whole concept of truth is entirely dissipated, and the hard core of reality in a truth based on painful experience would on this definition resolve itself into a palliative mist.

A more helpful approach is likely to be that offered by Goethe's dictum "Only what is fruitful is true". For fruitful is more than useful. One may perhaps best formulate the difference in this way: What is useful is that which proves to be successful for some given purpose. The point here is that the purpose is given, and man himself, along with his requirements, must be thought of as given. What is fruitful, however, is that which grows with the individual himself, developing for him new needs and new capabilities. In other words, the useful applies to some appropriate mode of conduct in a known world, whereas the fruitful is a productive element, bringing forth new and previously unsuspected possibilities. An example of something fruitful might be a new approach in science, an idea, an assumption - anything that does not at first sight reveal the possibilities lying latent within it. Seen thus, Goethe's dictum expresses a concept of truth rooted in a philosophy of life, transcending the merely pragmatic. What is true is all the views in which life is rooted, by which it is enriched - whereby we must for the moment leave the general concept "life" undefined in all its unclarity.

Another well-known formulation of Nietzsche's points in this direction: "The criterion of truth lies in the increase of the sense of power" (XVI 45) - at least if we take "sense of power" in the wider sense of an experience of the extent and wealth of life. I should also like to draw attention to a corresponding remark [29/30] of Saint-Exupery's: "Truths cannot be deduced by means of a series of proofs, they can only be tried out ... If a belief, a civilization, a yardstick, a plan of work is capable of triggering off in a man that fulfilment of which I am here speaking, then this yardstick, this civilization, this plan of work, this belief are the truth for that man." ¹

But there is much that can be comprehended neither according to the pragmatic criterion of truth nor according to the extended "life-philosophical" concept of truth. Whether I understand correctly a piece of human behaviour, or judge a social order correctly, or interpret a piece of poetry correctly etc. - none of this is to be measured according to some success or other. What is the success supposed to look like? Nor is the question of fruitfulness much help; for apart from the unclarity appertaining to this concept, the fruitfulness becomes apparent only in the long run.

This wider sphere adumbrated in the examples just quoted is that of man and the expression of his life, that of human relations and the way man orders his life. Habermas defines it as "communicative experience", distinguishing it in this way from "sensory experience": "Sensory experience leads to the perception of things, events or conditions which we ascribe to

¹ Antoine de Saint-Exupery, "Wind, Sand und Sterne", translated from the French by H. Becker, Tübingen 1947, p. 204 f. Cf. O. F. Bollnow, "Die Lebensphilosophie", Heidelberg 1958, p. 66 f.

things (we see that something is in a certain condition). Communicative experience, which builds up on sensory experience, leads via perceptions to an understanding of persons, utterances or conditions which we ascribe to persons (we 'see', i.e. we understand, that someone is in a certain condition) "² — whilst the objectivized structures of culture and society must be understood as being implied. We may designate this realm briefly and conveniently as the "spiritual world", and in so doing enter the sphere methodologically treated in the so-called humanities, a sphere for which the old term "hermeneutics" has recently been re-introduced. Thus we may speak of an hermeneutic experience. But we are not yet concerned here with the specifically scientific discoveries and the methodological problems of the [30/31] humanities, but primarily and initially with the truth that is, in a quite general sense, made accessible to us in the act of understanding. Here, in the realm of the "spiritual world", the question forces itself upon us as to whether there is any criterion of truth in this sphere at all, or whether one is not of necessity restricted to mere assumptions and non-committal opinions.

The only way to reach any solution in this matter is to take the problem quite concretely (in the sense of being guided by an anthropological approach) and start again with the question "What are the situations in human life in which man is confronted by something we may call 'truth' and in which he finds himself impelled to ask what truth is?". Does man find truth only when he seeks it for some reason, and for what reasons would he be incited to seek it, or can it happen to him that he comes face to face with truth quite unexpectedly, when he is not looking for it, and that perhaps in such situations he is most receptive to it?

A convenient guide-line is language usage, and a first clue is to be found in the answer to the question "What adjectives are most frequently used with 'truth?'". We speak of a bitter, painful, hard truth, also of a whole, pure, unadulterated, unvarnished, unveiled and naked truth. All these adjectives point in the same direction. In the case of the first set of adjectives (bitter, painful, hard) truth is thought of as something unpleasant and hurtful, something undeniably "there"; and to this is added the sense of the second set of adjectives: truth is usually concealed, encased in veils and covers, be they conscious deceptions or unconscious illusions. Truth is pure insofar as it is without adornment.

In other words, truth appears to be always something hard and cruel, which impinges on human life, as it were, from without, roughly jolting man out of the illusions in which he had hitherto comfortably enveloped himself. The experience of truth always destroys an illusion; and that is always bitter, beneficial as it may often be. Nietzsche expressly points out the harshness of truth: "No one should give way to humanitarian illusions: the truth is hard" (VII 235). "The truth is ugly" (XVI 94, 248). "The truth hurts because it destroys a belief" (XII 243). He sees himself as the propagator of a disillusioning and hard truth: "What I now call truth is something quite terrible and repulsive" (XIV 382). Hence he observes mockingly: "I promised the hard- [31/32] ness of truth ... and now I have knocked over these innocent children's milk-bowl" (351).

If for reasons of symmetry and balance one should be tempted to assume the existence of a pleasant truth, one that brings happiness to mankind, one cannot avoid the suspicion that anything of the kind could only be a free hypothetical construct. At all events, it is noteworthy that customary usage of language knows nothing of any such agreeable truth. A similar state of affairs appears to prevail here to that which we found prevailing in the concept of experience, namely that experience always contains a painful element inasmuch as it is a disappointment of some expectation. Although I do not wish to repeat here what I said earlier, the same

² Jürgen Habermas, "Vorbereitende Bemerkungen zu einer Theorie der kommunikativen Kompetenz", in: Jürgen Habermas/Niklas Luhmann, "Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie - Was leistet die Systemforschung?" Frankfurt/Main 1971, p. 206. See also the same author's "Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften", in: "Philosophische Rundschau", ed. H.-G. Gadamer and K. Kuhn, suppl. vol. 5, Tübingen 1967, p. 98.

could also be said of truth; for the perception of a hitherto unknown truth is always the result of experience.

But here too we must beware of hasty conclusions and for this reason put aside the question of an agreeable truth. It may well be that from this starting-point we have not yet adequately focused on the essence of truth. What concerns us at present is the question as to whether that very irksomeness of experience which we are often so painfully aware of could not perhaps be seen as a criterion of its truthfulness.

A convenient label for this criterion based on the painfulness of truth — a criterion that gives us the certainty that we are not the victims of error or arbitrary constructs in our struggle for truth - is "resistance of the thing". By this I mean that the "thing" I am investigating sets up a resistance to my wishes and expectations, being itself something solid and independent of these wishes and expectations, forcing me again and again to correct the assumptions I am applying to it. This is true not only of physical things, things we can bark our shins against, but more generally of facts that stand in our way, and it is only from this point of view that we can understand what a fact, in the full sense of the word, is.

This is not without its relevance for scientific work. If everything works out in my investigation, exactly in the manner I had envisaged, if one section dovetails neatly on to the next, then I must be wary: then I must reckon with the possibility that I have become enmeshed in untenable speculations and constructs. For this reason clearly surveyable and symmetrical systems of thought must always be treated with the utmost suspicion,- for [32/33] all too often the struggle for a clear and simple structure leads to a distortion of reality. Conversely, however, if things do not go as I had thought, if I am confronted by facts that do not accord with my expectations and which force me to rethink or think afresh, then I may be certain that I have struck the rockbed of reality and that I have solid ground under my feet. It is not until I meet with this "resistance of the thing" that that perception is kindled which penetrates ever deeper into the object. In this connexion a careful description, showing devotion to the object described, is an excellent means of avoiding the dangers of a hasty construct and of achieving closer and closer proximity to the object.

But here a word of caution would not be out of place. Whereas we can be fairly sure, when something fails to produce the expected result, that we are not groping in the mists of illusion, but are standing on the firm ground of reality, and can therefore to that extent be sure of the truth of our perceptions, so that we may take this to be a criterion of truth - whereas all this is so, the converse does not necessarily hold true. For if we experience no difficulties and the result comes up to our expectations, then we must admittedly be on our guard, but we ought not to jump to the conclusion that our assumptions are wrong. We cannot in such cases take resistance as a criterion of truth and must try to achieve certainty by some other means.