

# Scenes of Truth

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Willard Van Orman Quine's efforts, begun in the fifties, to overcome the dualism between analytic and synthetic judgments have had a devastating and irreversible effect on epistemology of both the phenomenalist and the physicalist [*fisicalistico*] kind. The epistemology of logical positivism assumed that scientific and, therefore, meaningful and cognitive propositions were translatable, without residue, into statements which referred to sense data—that is to assertions which contain the entry of the pure state of perceptual data. If, however, a statement cannot be true on the basis of its own meaning, then this thesis would imply, as Quine demonstrated, a vicious circle between the synonymy and the analyticity of linguistic expressions such that reference is inscrutable and translation is no longer a procedure that is operable on the basis of a firm logico-epistemological foundation. Thus, now we no longer have available a handbook for the translation.

Following the irreversible turn accomplished by Quine, a tendency enveloped post-neopositivist-analytic epistemology which—starting from the impossibility of carrying out operations of logically based translation and reduction—rejected the idea of the corroboration of theories in terms of a verification carried out statement by statement. Rejected also was the idea of singling out

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objects, whatever their nature might be, to which the statements would refer, since every theory is underpinned by its own referents. Besides, a theorem of the theory of models is that, given a class of true statements for any world whatsoever—that is, for our real world as for all possible worlds—this class is susceptible to a variety, almost an infinity of interpretations within a logically normalized notation. The road taken by epistemology and the philosophy of science, most noticeably in the sixties and seventies, was that of assuming a plurality of paradigms (Thomas Kuhn, Norwood Hanson), of “versions of the world” (Nelson Goodman), of conceptual schemes and criteria of rational decidability (Hilary Putnam)—according to which experience could be elaborated in such a way that empirical contents could be organized.

This had been the general strategy of the culture of paradigms in Kuhn and Hanson, or of the doctrine of the versions of the world in Goodman, and finally of the epistemology of “internal realism” in Putnam’s *Reason, Truth, and History*. This is fundamentally the strategy employed by the more influential exponents of analytic philosophy (and epistemology) in the sixties and seventies, albeit according to different inclinations, directions, and options.

But the story of this analytic commerce [*traffico*] did not end; for new problems and new questions are emerging today which are no less great and decisive than those which dictated the necessity of the great labor of adjusting and rectifying the neopositivist, phenomenalist, and physicalist epistemology that we have spoken about. If, indeed, as it has been observed,<sup>1</sup> the Quineian criticism of phenomenalist or physicalist reductionism and of the dichotomy between analytic judgments and synthetic judgments has had the effect of putting in crisis the “two dogmas” which belong to the tradition of empiricism, then now the substitute notion of the conceptual schemes of a reality or an uninterpreted experience seems to introduce what could be called the *third dogma* of empiricism—that of a *neutral experience*—one which is not interpreted and would subsist beyond all the conceptual schemes or all the versions of the world. It is said: we do not have an objective world; we do not have an experience in itself; available to us are paradigms alone—conceptual schemes or versions of that experience. We have in play here certain crucial philosophical points which decide, in my judgment, the very destiny of contemporary epistemology.

First of all, if it is true that we do not have experience or the world at our disposition, but only schemes or versions of experience, then we are lacking the base itself, the standard for saying

that the conceptual schemes are *schemes different from some thing*. Likewise, we are much less qualified to affirm that human beings have the same conceptual scheme or the same ontology in common. If there is no intelligible grasp of that by means of which the schemes are different or identical, then there is no sense in speaking of a multiplicity, a diversity, or an identity of conceptual schemes.

A serious and responsible analysis of this situation begins by declaring out of bounds the problem of cultural relativism, connected as it is to the doctrine of conceptual schemes. I want to say that the very idea of conceptual schemes shows a quite involuntary and tacit metaphysical presupposition. Analogously, the idea that translation is in principle not operable is likewise a metaphysical myth, since by saying that translation is impossible, we would have to have on hand an intelligible base, a standard or a criterion with respect to which we could measure the intrinsic fallibility of translation. The fact is, however, that we deal only with translations. But precisely because we do not have a logico-epistemo-logical foundation of translation, we cannot say that a translation is guaranteed, nor can we say that it is impossible. All we can do is compare translations with other translations according to a principle of interpretive charity referring to linguistic usages and to systems of belief, assumptions, and values which have sustained the transmitted texts of the tradition and the expressions that other speakers proffer.

Let us now consider an influential feature of the notion of truth. The notion of truth—whatever its versions may have been, such as the classical version of the *correspondence* between language or representation and facts, or as the *coherence* of a statement with a body or system of transmitted statements, or yet as empirical *corroboration* pursuable according to the alternative strategies of verification or falsification—has been the theme of the great philosophic commerce which has always tried to *explain* it, to *define* it, or to *construct* it according to rules or criteria that in every case were a surplus to the specific concrete statements which were declared to be true. It is as if, in a certain sense, philosophers up to now had created a gap or had drawn a line between the *statements declared or held to be true* on one hand and a rule *normative for truth* on the other, taken as the correct conduct for truth even before we come across a true statement.

For example, philosophers have said that "true" is [means] what corresponds to a fact or what is comparable to a sense datum [*dato di senso*, *Erlebniss*] or what is conformed to an actual or present experience. Now it is in the very act of posing these definitions

that all the problems and misunderstandings about the conduct to be assumed toward the concept of truth lurk. That a statement correspond or conform to a fact or to a perceptive datum—this does not clarify in the least the notion of truth as such.<sup>2</sup> More specifically, if we speak of truth as the compliance [*adeguamento*] of a statement to a fact or to a sensation or to a physical structure, I am not explaining—by means of reference to this entity—the notion of truth; rather, I am indicating the field, the aspect with which truth is concerned. By dragging out facts, sensations, the states of affairs, I do not add *an additional factor*, a new entity to the universe we know by sanctioning the legitimacy of a proposition in order to say that it is true.

Here again we have in play an *effect of duplication* that has often been put into operation in philosophy and even in the epistemology of mathematics, in the sense that the notion of class or of number was taken and subsequently described or defined as a finite or infinite class; and respectively as a natural number or as a rational number and therefore real, etc., with the tacit assumption that we are always dealing with the same entity which sustained this succession of characterizations and specializations, while we know that the algebraic number is not a mere extension of the natural number, and that a class of elements, howsoever finite, belongs to a regimen of definitions and logical principles which are different from that which is concerned with an infinite class.

The intrigue and equivocity of this game of philosophical prestige which externalizes itself in the duplication consists in a strategy which—starting from the meaning of a statement or from a true statement—duplicates the factors by introducing a sort of distance between the statement and its meaning, between the statement and its truth conditions. It is as if in these cases philosophical analysis pounced upon a meaningful statement or upon a meaningful and true statement to remove its condition of significance or of truth and then to resume its journey, with this booty among its provisions, so as to define a procedure of legitimization and of founding, destined to prescribe the meaning and truth conditions, respectively, of those statements. This may be a way of doing philosophy, as it has often been—based upon theft.

It is in the divorce that philosophy and epistemology have perpetrated between the statement and its conditions of truth and meaning—subjected to an independent and preliminary treatment which would be its hunting grounds—that philosophy has opened up and defined its own field of inquiry, finding at the same time in this field the destiny of its own drama and its own impossibilities. Philosophy performs upon the contents it investigates

a series of cuts that are its object of inquiry and at the same time the wound of an unhealable laceration. To this regimen of duplications—that philosophy initiates by simultaneously excavating the abysses into which it sinks—belong the classical dichotomies: fact and proposition, analytic judgments and synthetic judgments, and the latest conceptual schemes and versions of the world on one hand and the uninterpreted empirical contents on the other. Much of analytic philosophy and epistemology has had a good time in widening these cuts which were the effects of duplications established to produce foundational theories, but it did not succeed in healing and stitching the lips of the wounds that they had widened.

If a philosophical gesture slices the truth of a factual statement into the condition of stated meaning on one hand and into sensation, empirical content, or state of affairs which would be its conditions of truth on the other, that gesture finds itself in the impossible situation of trying to put these two conditions back together again. In other words, to determine or to found the truth by making it consist in the contrast or in the tally of these conditions, philosophy, in reality, constructs the very impossibility of their reconciliation. Such an impossibility is documented by the neopositivistic principle, according to which the sense and the truth of a statement consist in the method of its verification; or by the principle of phenomenalist or physicalist epistemology, according to which the sense and the truth of a statement consist in their accord with a perceptive datum.

Why, indeed, as we have already noted, should the truth be made intelligible by the circumstance that a statement adapt itself or is conformed to a fact, to a state of affairs, or to an impression? What makes the statement "The table is green" true is not an empirical fact but the fact that the statement "The table is green" is true, i.e., that it is translatable into the language that we share and live. But having arrived at this point, it is altogether misleading to speak of facts, seeing that facts are not the data with which to compare propositions but that facts are the very statements of the language that we know and into which we translate those expressions which can furnish us with our best insights about the notion of truth. We can say that the paths of truth are the very same paths of translation. The language that we know and in which we operate opens onto a horizon of truth, the horizon of propositions held to be true with respect to which we proceed with our jobs of translation. Beliefs and meanings of the statements hearken to this primordial horizon of truth.

We have to be there already—among true propositions. We cannot arrive, so to speak, from the outside. We cannot stand, as philosophers have sometimes held, outside of the truth and every now and then extend a hand to it, or arrive at it from the outside with a vehicle. We have to find ourselves already in the truth, i.e., in a horizon of true propositions in order to proceed to other true propositions. And this transition provides the commerce [*traffico*] of translation, i.e., from true propositions to other true propositions. A horizon of truth in which we are historically immersed constitutes the influential scene, i.e., of the ensemble of statements held true from which we proceed toward other truths, i.e., toward other meanings and beliefs.

The term "horizon" serves to designate precisely that condition through which it is not possible primarily to advance the idea of truth as the tallying of a statement with a fact, a state of affairs, or a sense impression.

Why, indeed, as we have noted, should the truth be made intelligible by the circumstance that it is adapted or conformed to a fact? How could I say that a statement is true because it corresponds to a fact if I did not already have the notion of a *factually true statement*, which I then proceeded in philosophical work to separate into the notion of "true" and the notion of "fact" and finally in the presumed recomposition of their contrast? We deal with true statements, but not with things, facts, sensations that would render these statements true. If we wish to talk about facts, the only facts that we can legitimately evoke are the true propositions themselves. But it is at this point that it is no longer of any use to talk about facts or sense impressions or worlds that would make the propositions true because their (very) mention would be ultimately misleading.

Instead of trying to establish the truth conditions of statements by resorting to facts, sense impressions, states of affairs, and fictitious and magical relations such that the former dwell upon the latter, we must renounce the producing of foundations of impossible contrasts and comparisons and pass resolutely to a description of truth as a regimen of linguistic translations. This is to complete the passage toward the situation in which the truth is the putting to work of a procedure of translating statements. We have as many truths as there are translations we succeed in producing. We ought, then, to direct the notion of truth not toward a domain of facts, states of affairs, or worlds that would legitimate statements, but toward a regimen of operations wherein translating and interpreting are done. What we meet then is a circle of statements which by being interpreted and translated imply the



awareness of the beliefs and intentions of those who have formulated and proposed them—beliefs and intentions which are grasped, however, solely in the statements to which they are assigned. To make or recognize the truth is to perform this operation of translating statements on the basis of beliefs and intentions which in their turn are incorporated into the language which constitutes the horizon of the influential scenes of truth belonging to our form of life. In substance, the acceptance of something as true, the decision that commits us to a statement and the sticking to it is the intransitive condition which is our point of departure. "Intransitive" means here the decision not to presuppose the distinction of the status of the statement from its factors of truth—sense impressions, states of affairs, words—and then the possibility of their contrast and their comparison.

I am immediately in the truth which I utter. I do not arrive from the outside. All the rest is the ramification of that first intransitive act. Language is intransitive in such a way that one does not begin to speak but one speaks from within and immediately. The discrepancy between judgments—for example, taking one thing for another, a hand for a glove—provided that they do not depend upon anomalies or accidental fortuities—can be measured and analyzed through a labor of translation which runs down the statements and body of beliefs to what holds them together. We can do no more than this, but there is no more that can be done. The truth is a regimen that goes on to the extent to which the domain of translation goes on, from the contrast between propositions held to be true with other propositions held to be true. The relevant significance of the circumstance that the truth is measured by the contrast between propositions held to be true consists in the recognition that we cannot maneuver the notion by placing ourselves as philosophers in the moment that precedes the truth. It is by having pretended to grasp that moment—wherein one pretends to glance at truth over one's shoulder—that philosophy has always recruited the destiny of its desperate attempts.

Now we can draw the consequences of this rotation of the axis of our considerations. If the truth is a task and a prospective of translation, and if the propositions held true are an inextricable part of the horizon of the beliefs wherein we live; and if the acceptance of a proposition as true is the crucial notion that constitutes an intransitive decision, there could be no recourse to a fact, to a state of affairs, which could invalidate the question whether the differences between the speakers of different languages depend upon the diversity of the beliefs or upon the diver-

sity of the *conceptual schemes*, or upon the versions of the workaday world. When we meet persons or speakers who think differently from ourselves, we can have no recourse to a fact, to evidence, or to a criterion which could establish whether the difference between us resides in their conceptual schemes or in the assemblage of their beliefs instead. This all happens through the essential circumstance that we translate propositions, interpreting them in terms of other propositions independently of a criterion of reference to facts, states of affairs, or sense impressions of which the statements would amount to the conceptual schemes. We do not possess the possibility to compare our statements with the statements of those who think differently than we on the basis of the difference of the conceptual schemes of an uninterpreted reality or experience *out there*. The truths, therefore, remain relative to the natural languages which are the fluid in which we are immersed while we live. The certifying of truths consists in operations of translation and of continuous reciprocal adjustments of statements which incorporate beliefs and of beliefs which appear exclusively in the texture of the statements. But this is the entire effort of the exercise that we can exert on the notion of truth—a duty of translating statements which is not conducted on the basis of a standard or a criterion aimed at the approximation of an uninterpreted reality *out there* or at preconditions of a permanent transcendental kind, or yet, at the arrival of a truth as the ideal limit of the successive approximations made by human cognitive enterprises. We deal rather with the conduct of a translation practiced according to a principle of interpretive charity,<sup>3</sup> according to which statements related to beliefs are compared to other statements immanent to beliefs.

Consequently, the idea of the impossibility of translation or of its perfect fidelity are two equivalent metaphysical myths, inspired by the presupposition of an uninterpreted reality which human beings would model, as it comes upon conceptual schemes, or versions of the world. We know, however, that the idea of that impossibility as well as that of a guaranteed translation are both philosophical mythologies. We have in reality at our disposal only translations of statements. And the only thing we can do is compare translations on the basis of a principle of interpretive charity. It is as if to say, which is to say it again, that we do not compare statements with facts, states of affairs, or impressions in order to make intelligible the notion of truth; that we travel, finally, and we are destined to travel in the translated of the translation. Is this idealism? Have we had a relapse into an



idealism brought up to date as linguistic idealism? On the contrary. For it was precisely the idea of versions of the world, and of conceptual schemes that obstruct our access to the world. By means of the doctrines of conceptual schemes, of the versions of the world, we were exiled from the world. And it is precisely by liberating ourselves from the idea of a conceptual scheme which masks an uninterpreted experience that we can approach the objects which surround us, as if they were old, rediscovered friends. A friend is someone we look at without the suspicion of a threatening reality lurking inside him or her.

1. Cf. Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford, 1985), 190.
2. Davidson, 193-94.
3. Cf. Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History* (Cambridge, 1981), 117; Davidson, 197.

