

Ontology, Epistemology, Objectivity and Truth – Phillip Hoffmann © 2021

The claim I defend in this paper is as follows: *a commitment to ontology—and to the pre-eminence of ontology over epistemology as our point of departure when we philosophize—is a necessary and sufficient condition for an objective (or realist) conception of truth to obtain, a conception of truth that I take to be explicitly ontological in nature.* Most of the remainder of this paper will unpack this thesis and outline arguments in its favour.

Before we proceed to the unpacking and the arguments, however, I have to admit that at first blush that a claim such as mine may well come across as unfashionable, outdated and even regressive in contemporary intellectual circles. Why? The reason is that, at least as presented so far, my view seems to belong to the metaphysical and rationalist tradition of Plato that takes the notion of eternal truths for granted. As such, it would seem that I ignore major, transformational developments in Western philosophy since ancient Greek times. In particular, these developments include the so-called *epistemological turn* of early modern philosophy, famously initiated by Descartes, not to mention the *analytic turn* of the early twentieth century. But please bear with me, as I will conclude with a twist that I trust will undermine the perception that I am a rationalist in the good old-fashioned, Platonic sense.

Let us briefly examine these developments and their implications with a sympathetic eye before I turn to building my case. In the opening paragraphs of his first *Meditation*, Descartes ushered in a radical and novel approach to *philosophical methodology* that precipitated a revolution that reverberates in Western philosophy to this day. Until then, philosophical *methodology*, which concerns *the way in which we go about philosophizing* (as opposed to the actual content or theories generated by our philosophical labours), conformed for the most part with a tradition stretching back to the pre-Socratics, a tradition known as *rationalism*. Roughly speaking, the assumptions and aims of the rationalist project are as follows. *We inhabit a world that is in principle comprehensible and is amenable to yielding its innermost secrets to us through the rigorous, thoroughgoing application of human reason. Furthermore, important truths about the world are a priori (or prior to experience); and such truths reveal themselves to any of us who is sufficiently trained or intellectually perspicuous enough to divine them. Finally, the task of philosophy is to formulate theories and explanations that reveal deep, eternal truths about our putatively comprehensible world.*

Plato is the most obvious and famous practitioner of rationalism, but in general, this philosophical approach underlies the vast majority of contributors to the Western philosophical canon up until the early modern period, including medieval Christian theists such as Aquinas and Anselm, for whom the world is known in its entirety to God, who serves as a proxy for the perfect realization of the rationalist fantasy. While rationalism is not quite dead—twentieth century adherents to it include scientists such as Einstein and Sir Roger Penrose—it is fair to say that most contemporary philosophers regard it as at best a quaint relic of a distant past, and at worst a deluded artefact of an outmoded, patriarchal tradition. The reasons for its decline are many and varied, and we will return to a few of them in the course of this paper.

As a methodology, rationalism is usually compared and contrasted with *empiricism*. Empiricism rejects rationalism's faith in the power of reason to divine truths about the world, relying instead

on taking nature at face value based on our *observations* of it. Empiricists tend to hew closely to a preference for performing measurements, tests and experiments on observables in order to frame specific, narrowly defined hypotheses resulting in cautious conclusions, as opposed to grandiose, all-encompassing theoretical constructions such as, say, Plato's Forms. If the empiricist project sounds similar to the methods and modest metaphysical means of science, that is no coincidence. The early architects of the rise of modern science, including Bacon, Galileo and Copernicus, not to mention eminent successors of theirs such as Newton, La Place, Boyle and many more, hugely influenced the rise not only of a long line of empiricist philosophers from Hume to Reid to the Logical Positivists to Quine, but of the Enlightenment and its continental champions such as Voltaire, Diderot, Condillac and Condorcet, among others.

What, then, of the legacy I am attributing to Descartes in his first *Meditation*? Descartes was a theist and is widely regarded as firmly belonging to the rationalist tradition, and rightly so. Recall that although his stated aim in his first *Meditation* was to establish secure foundations for knowledge starting from a purely subjective, introspective standpoint, it didn't take long for his inner rationalist to reveal itself, and by the time he concludes his series of *Meditations* we find him back with the creature comforts of theism and the familiar trappings of rationalism. Whether the moves he makes along the way are justified given his point of departure and the task he initially set for himself is highly debatable, of course, but I am less interested in revisiting well-worn arguments about these moves than in making a different point.

Roughly paralleling the rationalist-empiricist axis, although different from it in important and subtle ways, is another axis, namely that of a methodological choice we face between adopting an *objective* versus a *subjective* starting point when it comes to philosophizing. And it is in *this* light that the beginning of Descartes' first *Meditation*, with its dramatic and explicitly subjective point of view, that makes him a revolutionary. That said, it is not as if *no* subjective elements whatsoever had crept into Western philosophical thought before Descartes—Augustine and Boethius come to mind as examples of how such lines had already been blurred—but Descartes threw down the gauntlet by making the here-and-now, first-person standpoint to be a perfectly natural, if not even necessary, way of going about philosophizing. After taking that small step for philosophy, no-one could pretend any longer that this was not a perfectly legitimate way to go about philosophizing.

The influence of this development has been long lasting and inescapable, particularly in European philosophy. From Kant to the British and German idealists to Nietzsche to the French existentialists to the phenomenologists to Heidegger and beyond, Western philosophy since Descartes bears the indelible imprint of the move toward recognizing and in varying degrees embracing a purely subjective standpoint as an legitimate option with respect to philosophizing. I am painting with very broad brushstrokes here. There are major differences between exploring the anatomy of one's consciousness from a subjective, first-person standpoint, and focusing on the nature, scope and limits of human knowledge. The latter is what is usually understood by reference to "the epistemological turn" in philosophy. But what these apparently disparate philosophical concerns share is discarding the preoccupation with *what exists* (and the various assumptions and baggage that existence questions entail) and a turn toward questions about what we experience, think, believe and know (or at least what we are *able* to know).

Stated as such, the epistemological turn seems to make eminent sense. After all, even a cursory reflection on the human condition suggests that we are getting way ahead of ourselves if we take our task in philosophy to be to discover eternal truths about a world that, for all we know, is way beyond our ability to comprehend. Hilary Putnam once grouched about David Lewis that Lewis and his fellow Australian realists were pursuing metaphysics as if Kant had never existed, and Putnam's point is very well taken. After all, it was Kant who forcefully argued that the world as it is *in itself* is beyond our ken and that our task as philosophers is to train our critical tools on the structure and limits of what we *are* able to know. Knowing what we know now—and, more importantly, knowing what we *don't* know now—surely implies that the entire rationalist project is adorably naïve at best and a massive case of hubris at worst. Either way, the lesson that appears to emerge from the epistemological turn is that the most we can hope to achieve when it comes to philosophy is whatever we can glean from sticking to our epistemological knitting. And if we do that, then for those keeping score at home in terms of my original claim in this paper, it would seem that it's Epistemology 1, Ontology 0.

So far, so bad for ontology, the nature of existence and eternal truths. What about the analytic turn that heralded the dawn of twentieth century Western philosophy? If the epistemological turn marked a retreat from the lofty dreams of rationalism, then the analytic turn took this retreat a step further. The rationale for the analytic turn is that since knowledge claims are expressed in linguistic terms, then understanding those claims in a rigorous way requires us to analyze and clearly define the terms and statements comprising those claims. Following this line of reasoning led the Logical Positivists so far as to conclude that metaphysical claims concerning, for example, the existence of God are, in a strict sense, *meaningless*. The reasoning here is that since there is so little agreement about the meaning of a term such as “God,” much less empirical evidence for any entity putatively referred to by that term, the word “God” and statements including it are devoid of meaning.

On this approach, the existence of objects, including abstract entities such as sets, numbers and other mathematical exotica, is dealt with by considering them as belonging to the *domain of objects* in the interpretation of purely formal systems of logic such as first-order logic. In such systems, we populate domains of objects with abstract entities called variables and names, which we in turn manipulate with the logical machinery of quantifiers, rules of inference and logical operations. The resulting systematization is clinical, sterile, and devoid of metaphysical baggage or commitments, which is precisely the point. As an aside, David Lewis's modal realism, which attempts to span the gap between formal logic and good old-fashioned metaphysics, can be regarded as an outlier in this respect.

So much, then, for the diminished and highly attenuated role left for ontology in analytic philosophy. What about truth in the context of analytic philosophy? Not surprisingly, truth, too was intended to be subjected to linguistic analysis and logical methods, but in the case of truth an interesting quirk arose. The quirk was a problem that Bertrand Russell had discovered was lurking in the ambitious and otherwise ingenious system of logic that Gottlob Frege had constructed in the late 1800s. The issue stems from the fact that language, including natural language and certain formal language systems, exhibits the property of *self-reference*, which is analogous to the property of *self-awareness* we are all so intimately acquainted with as conscious human beings. A simple example of a self-referential sentence is the following: *This sentence*

has five words. The upshot of the property of self-reference, however, is that sentences can also generate paradoxes, as in the following example: *This sentence contains only non-hyphenated words*. The previous sentence is true if it is false and false if it is true. While linguistic paradoxes of this sort might seem at first to be mere idle curiosities, it turns out they are powerful enough to scupper all attempts to provide a straightforward, satisfactory account of truth in purely linguistic or logical terms.

Alfred Tarski and others proposed that the paradox problems of language could be solved by making a distinction between sentences at the level of our ordinary, everyday discourse, which we can call the *object language*, and those at a second level, called the *meta-language*. The idea here is that object-language sentences can be evaluated as true or false, as the case may be, in the meta-language. So, for example, a sentence such as “*Snow is white*” is an ordinary, object-language expression, but the sentence “‘*Snow is white*’ is true” names our original, object-language sentence in the meta-language, and moreover states that the object-language sentence that it names is true. Okay, fine, but then what could possibly make the sentence: “‘*Snow is white*’ is true” true? The same logic that motivated the object-language/meta-language distinction would seem to dictate that we now need a third language level, which would yield: “‘‘*Snow is white*’ is true” is true”, and so on, *ad infinitum*. While this process, known as *semantic ascent*, does manage to avert paradox problems, it neither resembles how we actually use language, nor does it do justice to how we ordinarily understand truth; and so as a general account of truth, Tarski’s so-called *semantic theory of truth* is ultimately inadequate.

One reaction to the contrivances of the semantic account, called the *minimalist* (or *redundancy*) theory of truth, attempts to streamline the semantic theory of truth by eliminating the object-language/meta-language distinction. The idea here is that when we formulate an ordinary, declarative sentence such as “Snow is white,” truth is simply a matter what we *intend to convey* in formulating it. So on this account, to say “Snow is white” is simply to imply that we intend to say something true in stating it. The simplicity of this account may seem to flag the theory as potentially being too good to be true, so to speak, and indeed, so it is. Intentions are cheap, and we all know too well that we sometimes *intend* to make true statements that unfortunately turn out to be false. In my own case, for example, among the most famous of my famous last words is this: *Trust me, honey, there’s no milk in the fridge*. So much for truth being merely a matter of our best intentions. I rest my case.

Furthermore, how are we to sort through cases where what we intend to convey involves nuances such as ambiguity, irony or metaphor, not to mention contexts such as the statements of actors on stage, role-playing, and so on? On the other hand, deep truths *can* be revealed in the utterances of certain actors who entertain us—think of a Shakespearian fool, for example—and there is arguably also truth in fiction. For example, it’s true that Sherlock Holmes wears a deerstalker cap and not a panama hat. The point of all this nit-picking is that the project of reducing our understanding of truth purely to the level of formal or informal languages turn out to be easier said than done, and that those attempts flounder because they have proved to generate more puzzles than they solve.

There are several other contemporary theories of truth, but in the interests of brevity let us touch on just one more theory that has been very influential: the *correspondence theory*. The idea here

is straightforward enough: statements are true if and when they correspond to *states of affairs in the world*. So, for example, the statement: *Grass is green* is true if it corresponds to a particular state of affairs in the world pertaining to the colour of grass, but not true otherwise. This linkage between words and the world seems to be highly intuitive, and indeed it surely aligns with how we ordinarily assume language is supposed to serve us in the first place. What could possibly go wrong? Unfortunately, quite a lot. Anyone inclined to be pedantic—you know who you are—will point out that grass roots are not green, that grass is not green during Canadian winters, and so on. But as it turns out, the correspondence theory cannot be rescued merely by waving aside pedantic objections, because all kinds of other problems lurk under the surface when we try to explain how words and the world supposedly connect.

For example, following John Locke, physicists are quick to remind us that greenness is in our heads, not at all in the world. In that case, what are we *actually* describing when we say that grass is green: our inner mental states or an outside world? Moreover, there is nothing sugary-tasting about the word “sweet,” nothing fragrant about the word “rose,” and, as I can attest, nothing intoxicating about the word “wine,” as I learned the hard way once when I tried to drink the label on the bottle because the label said “wine.” Hey, I’m not stupid; I can read! We rely on dictionary definitions to help us learn the *meanings* of words, but a dictionary is a closed system consisting of a collection of words that are defined in terms of each other. At no point does a dictionary entry miraculously leap off the page and somehow hook onto something in the world. All this is to say that the original idea of a words-to-world correspondence, which seems so plausible at first blush, actually presents deep puzzles; and that spells deep trouble for the correspondence theory.

Where does all this leave us? The epistemological turn resulted from the dawning realization that ontology was a futile exercise indulged in by, to paraphrase Oscar Wilde, the incorrigible in pursuit of the ineffable. The analytic turn contributed more nails to the coffin of ontology, with the exception of some scattered pockets of resistance in the form of David Lewis and a few scientists who are blissfully unconcerned about learning lessons from the history of philosophy. Analytic philosophy, however, has fallen short when it comes to providing a satisfactory account of the notion of truth. But why does a theory of truth even matter? How exactly does truth relate to ontology? And where do we go from here? To make further progress, we first need to take a step back to Descartes and the methodological distinction I drew between objectivity and subjectivity.

The shift Descartes made in switching from a subjective to an objective perspective is hiding in plain sight in the pithy, immortal argument he presented in the second Meditation: *Cogito ergo sum*. Recall that he reasons from “*I think*,” which he bases directly on the turmoil of his inner, *subjective* experience and his myriad doubts, to “*I am*,” which is an existence claim and therefore ontological in nature. Moreover, he takes his existence to be absolutely beyond doubt, which is to say that he construes his existence to be true in an absolute, *objective* sense. The whole point of the conclusion he comes to, *sum* (or *I am*), and the reason it is so profound, is that it is not to be confused with yet another mere sensory datum about which he could be deceived. Having established, at least to his own satisfaction, one absolute, indubitable truth, he is off to the races and the rest is history in terms of his return to rationalism.

Perhaps nowhere else in the history of philosophy have subjective and objective perspectives collided in such a stark, dramatic and revealing way as in the three Latin words of the *cogito*. But whatever one may think about whether Descartes successfully bridges the gap between subjective and objective standpoints, what is our takeaway from this? What the *cogito* illustrates—or rather, what its conclusion illustrates if not the argument as a whole—is the way that adopting an objective perspective underlies the notion of absolute truth as it is construed by rationalists. Descartes takes his own existence to be absolutely beyond doubt *and* beyond his own subjectivity. In other words, notwithstanding the subjective path he takes to get there, he construes his own existence to be an objective truth.

The notion of objective truth is a talisman not only of rationalism, but of the metaphysical position known as *realism*, which I define very simply as the view that *not everything is human-mind dependent*. If not everything is human-mind dependent, this means that not everything is purely subjective, which in turn means that there is room for objectivity beyond us, *additional to* subjective human experience. Whatever it is one takes to be objective, be it Descartes' existence, God, numbers, fundamental constants of physics, Platonic Forms or what have you, this automatically generates objective truth, because objective truth is baked into our very understanding of the idea of human-mind independence. To formulate this point in slightly more formal terms: *Something x objectively exists if and only if it is objectively true that x objectively exists*.

Suppose we turn this on its head and begin from the standpoint of pure subjectivity. The purest form of subjectivity imaginable is *instantaneous solipsism*, which is the view that *the only thing there is is one's own subjective experience in the immediate here and now*. Now, let us ask ourselves how such a view could possibly be *true*? If there *really is* nothing but one's own subjective experience in the immediate here and now, then for the instantaneous solipsist's *position* to be true, there has to be something *in addition to* whatever he or she is immediately experiencing, namely, *the truth of instantaneous solipsism*. But no such additional truth is possible based on the premise of instantaneous solipsism itself, and so truth cannot, so to speak, attach itself to the instantaneous solipsist's position.

The nexus between rationalism and metaphysical realism now comes into full view. Rationalism is based on the premise that we pursue philosophy *as if* there is objective, mind-independent truth, and realism *requires* objective, human mind-independent truth. We may think of this conception of truth as *ontological truth*. Fine, but what are some specific examples of mind-independent truths (alternatively, examples of what exists independently of the human mind)? At the risk of disappointing you, I don't know, and nor does a realist even *need* to know, because recall that in my original claim involves merely the *commitment* to ontology and to the primacy of ontology over epistemology. And so it is with objective truth and realism. Actually *citing* an objective truth is one thing, but professing a commitment to the idea that there must be at least one such truth in order for realism to hold is another; it is the commitment that is all that is actually needed for realism.

This emphasis on ontological commitment rather than metaphysical substance or content *per se*, is somewhat similar, at least in spirit, to Kant's position regarding the *noumenon* (which is his term for *the world as it is in itself*). Recall that for Kant, knowing what the *noumenon* is like is

not possible, but that is different from his insistence that it must exist. Kant needs the *noumenon* in order to make sense of what we subjectively experience: the *phenomenal* realm. In short, Kant needs the *ineffable* to make sense of the *effable*, and so it goes with metaphysical realism more generally. We need ontology to make sense of epistemology, and we need objective truth to make sense of subjective experience. As meagre as it admittedly is, a weak commitment of a Kantian kind is really all that realism minimally requires. Nor is a commitment to realism, objective truth and realism to be confused with an act of faith, *à la* theism. The reason is that theists believe that God exists, whereas realists realize—or at least they *should* realize—that the world owes us no favours with respect to what exists or objective truth.

This last point was driven home sharply, if entirely unexpectedly, in 1931 by Kurt Gödel with his two incompleteness theorems, which demonstrated the implications for mathematical logic of the self-reference and paradox issues that we mentioned earlier. Without going into details, Gödel proved that undecidable statements inevitably arise in formal systems as basic as ordinary arithmetic (with multiplication). For our purposes, his results showed that truth is endless in the sense that it cannot be circumscribed by what can be proven, but there is an important caveat. His result holds *only if* the truth-generating system in question is consistent, meaning that it is free of contradiction. Moreover, his second incompleteness theorem proved that the consistency of a given truth-generating system cannot be proved from *within the system itself*. It's a bit like the saying: *you can't read the label from inside the bottle*. This means that if arithmetic is consistent, we will never definitively know that it is, although it will always be possible that we will someday discover arithmetic to be *inconsistent*. This would happen if and when someone ever comes up with a proof that $0 = 1$. The prospect of such a proof is the worst nightmare of every mathematician, of course, but it is one that, according to Gödel, we can never rule out. In other words, and this is a key lesson, *the world owes us no favours*, at least in terms of the consistency (or otherwise) of arithmetic. And this lesson about consistency and contradiction is one that every realist needs to take to heart.

Gödel's theorems are perhaps best viewed as two of the most profound of a series of results in the past two hundred years that mathematicians call “no go” theorems. These are theorems that in various ways place strict and rigorous limits on what it is we are able to know or to prove. I would also include the *uncertainty principle* in quantum mechanics as belonging to this development. While all of these results place strict limitations on our knowledge, they are not a death sentence for realism. In fact, if anything, they arguably only go to show that realism is more vital and necessary—albeit more elusive—than ever.

Now it is reasonable to question the relevance and legitimacy of drawing metaphysical lessons from Gödel's technical results in mathematical logic. However, my view is that unless it can be clearly shown that there are substantive or qualitative differences between truth in arithmetic and truth *in general*, then Gödel's results inevitably have metaphysical implications. That is to say, if arithmetic is consistent, then *arithmetic truth* is open-ended and unlimited, in which case truth *a fortiori* is open-ended. Similarly, if arithmetic is inconsistent, then *a fortiori* the very idea of truth—that is to say, *objective truth*—is invalidated once and for all. After all, what would be left of any robust sense of truth if $0 = 1$, $2+2 = 5,173$, and so on? If inconsistency reigns in the realm of arithmetic, the numbers in my bank account would show me to be as wealthy as a prince *and* a pauper, black would be white, and apples would be oranges. So, as it turns out, the fate of truth,

realism, objectivity and ontology are very much tied to the consistency or otherwise of arithmetic. Who knew?

As for the crucial question as to whether arithmetic (and by extension our world) really *does* embody contradiction, I don't know the answer, and nor, I'm willing to venture, do you. As for me, let's just say that I would not bet the farm on consistency. Why? Because unfortunately the circumstantial evidence is not exactly promising. You want consistency? So do I. But have you ever listened to a speech by Donald Trump? Or, for that matter, have you ever been in a relationship? You can see where this is going. And while that last point was played for laughs, it belies a much more serious point. If you care at all about the prevalence of nonsense, fake news or conspiracy theories, then *truth*, by which of course I mean *objective* truth, actually matters. Objective truth is a matter of what is *objectively the case*, which in turn requires us to take metaphysical realism and ontology not only seriously, but as fundamental in the sense that in a very real and urgent sense, we must take ontology to take precedence over epistemology. At the end of the day, objective truth and the primacy of ontology over epistemology *matter*. They *really do* matter. Indeed, they matter as much as anything I can think of *can* matter. And *that* is my point.