

TRUTH AND CONVENTION

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Often it seems that *the* answer to a philosophical question is simply *an* answer we decide upon. Sometimes we need only remind ourselves of a decision or convention already adopted. Sometimes we have to come up with a new decision. When philosophers term a question *logical* or *linguistic*, what they usually mean is either that our *de facto* logical or linguistic conventions give us an answer to the question or that new logical or linguistic conventions are called for.

I

The paper will probably be charged with being unfair to facts. Though *fact* is philologically *something made*, [a] *factum*, usually a fact is treated as something discovered or uncovered, as something found rather than made. To ask for the answers to certain questions, or solutions to problems, is to ask for the facts of the matter. Where there are no facts of the matter, there is no genuine question or problem; we are in the area of taste or opinion. We let everyone choose for himself, or we adopt some version of the democratic principle and let some majority decide.

All knowledge is, on this common view, knowledge of matters of fact. Inquiry is the process of uncovering facts, the process of uncovering or discovering the truth. Science, especially natural science, is preeminently, the great discoverer of facts. Common sense is also a discoverer of facts, but science is superior to common sense in its techniques of uncovering and discovering. Aristotle's intellectual intuition, the illumination theory of the Middle Ages, Descartes' natural light of reason, and Husserl's intuition of essences all reflect the same view of human knowledge. Facts are out there. Facts are America. After due preparation, we are accross the Atlantic and we discover America; we can read off the facts.

As long as the process of uncovering or discovering is expressed in figurative terms, it seems quite acceptable. When we try to trade in the figurative for a more literal account, it collapses. When it does collapse, as it does under the criticisms of David Hume and Karl Popper, for instance, we find our knowledge of facts severely limited. This does not mean, of course, that facts are not in some sense out there; just that our access to them is severely limited.¹ To admit that our access to the facts is severely limited, is to admit that scepticism is a reasonable attitude. But scepticism itself does not go down easily, so maybe we ought to take an especially sceptical look at scepticism. The trouble with scepticism, some would say, is that it severely limits our means of gaining access to the facts. There must be other means. For if there were not it would be reasonable to accept scepticism. (But, of course, it is not reasonable). This is essentially, the *dogmatic* response to scepticism. It has been the classical response to scepticism at least since Thomas Reid rejected Hume's conclusions. Roderick Chisholm makes very clear the structure of the Sceptic-Dogmatist controversy:²

The dogmatist argues this way:

- 1) We do know more things than the sceptic says we know.
- 2) If our access to facts were limited in the way the sceptic claims, we would not know more than the sceptic says we do.
- 3) Our access to the facts is not limited in the way the sceptic says it is.

Even the defender of natural science must be a dogmatist to some extent, given this view of knowledge as involving gaining access to facts. Some extend dogmatism to Ethics, others as far as Religion. In any event, even the dogmatist agrees that knowledge extends only so far as matters of fact.³ Some facts may be especially difficult to gain access to, but once access is gained, there is no further room for argument. It takes a kind of blindness not to see something that is right in front of you. Once you have gained access to the facts, you have to be blind not to know them.

This view of knowledge has had its detractors. Kant was perhaps

¹ It can of course, be asked, why we should even talk about entities to which we have no access; we will return to this question.

² See R. Chisholm's, *The Theory of Knowledge*, especially Ch. 7.

³ What about relations of ideas, analytic knowledge? Either this is trivial knowledge as it is for the sceptic, Hume, or it is knowledge of a special kind of fact, as it is for Plato, Aristotle and Husserl. This is a complex and difficult area and we will not discuss it further here.

the first to give us a very different view of the nature of human knowledge and the place of facts. In the 20th century, John Dewey and Karl Popper have strongly opposed such a view. But what do they put in its place? Dewey, for instance, calls facts *operational*:

What is meant by calling facts operations? Upon the negative side what is meant is that they are not self sufficient and complete in themselves. They are selected and described. . . for a purpose, namely the statement of the problem involved in such a way that is material both indicates a meaning relevant to the resolution of the difficulty and serves to test its worth and validity.⁴

For Dewey, facts are not discovered, they are selected, interpreted; perhaps, constructed. There is no such thing as "the facts of the case" independent of the context of inquiry.

We are not denying that *fact* can be explicated to a certain extent. A fact is a true proposition and a proposition is a set of synonymous sentences. If some such explication is accepted then we are left with the problem of explicating *truth*, with Pilate's problem. Notice that a view of truth which talks about facts is likely to involve circularity, since *true* is explicated in terms of *fact* and *vice versa*. A phrase like the familiar *corresponds with reality* would not likely be an improvement because *reality* would itself need to be defined, and one reasonable candidate-definition would be Wittgenstein's *the total set of facts* ("The world is the totality of facts, not of things.") and we are in a circle again. Any attempt to deal with *truth* in terms of correspondence or in terms of semantic notions like *satisfaction* and *denotation* will not get us anywhere because it will leave fundamental notions unexplicated. This is more than the problem that any system must face in connection with its primitive terms. In the present case, we are likely to be under the illusion that we do really know what we are talking about, that we understand talk of reality, of objects, i.e. that we have an understanding of ontological talk. We think we really know what features of the world and of our language make it possible for us to speak the truth.

W.V.O. Quine, in his more recent work, has stressed that the philosopher cannot take his ultimate stand within the theory of reference. We need to get outside the confines of even Tarski Semantics. In Tarski Semantics, our references to reality are always mediated by some background or presupposed language. The Tarski

⁴ "The Pattern of Inquiry" in *Experience, Nature and Freedom*, ed. Bernstein, p. 125.

truth-definition, for instance, is simply a translation from object to metalanguage; it does not get us out of the language-boat.

Realist-sounding talk about facts, about reality, makes it look like there is some operative procedure by which we can get at the truth by getting to reality. Even as a *regulative idea*, truth comes with *associations* of a block universe, of a symmetry between future and past, and even of the irrelevance of human decision and action. It is these *associations* which distort the nature of philosophical questions. For if there is a fact of the matter, it looks like the task of the philosopher is to uncover it. If this has not been done, and we are not able to identify scapegoats, we are strongly tempted to say, almost in self-defense, that there is no fact of the matter, that there is something wrong with the question, that it is a metaphysical question, that it is cognitively meaningless, that it is a pseudo-question. My thesis can perhaps be put this way. *Realistic* ways of talking employing the ideas of *truth*, *fact* and *reality* provide an *unrealistic* approach to philosophical questions. We would be better off if we employed the idioms of *convention* and *rationality*, and recognized the centrality of decision, without, however, assuming that arbitrariness has to go hand in hand with it.

II

What I am suggesting is that we replace the *truth-fact-reality* framework with one that centers upon the notions of *rationality* and *convention*. To use somewhat old-fashioned language, I am stressing the primacy of *practical* over *theoretical* reason. The solution to a philosophical problem is a matter of adopting the most rational, or a most rational, convention. Philosophy asks: How *should* we talk? All this is, of course, quite programmatic. What I want to do in the rest of this paper is begin explicating the key terms *rationality* and *convention* and thereby provide enough understanding of the framework to show that it is a practicable alternative to what may be termed the *ontological* or *realist* framework. Once this is done, I will sketch how a number of important philosophical problems can be interpreted within this framework,

Let me begin with *rationality*. I will employ essentially a decision-theoretical conception. Decisions are rational to the extent they maximize expected utility. This captures at least one quite ordinary sense of rationality according to which people are rational to the extent that they attempt to do what will lead to the best results. Rationality is, in economic terms, a matter of getting the most for the least. But notice, *most*, *least* and *utility* are not

themselves completely defined. Individuals may have any system of values, of preference orders, just so long as these satisfy some rather weak conditions of coherence. Individuals may be selfish or altruistic, Dodger fans or Giant fans, culture snobs or beer slobs. They may value safety first or be compulsive gamblers. The theory of rationality simply requires that individuals attempt to maximize their expected utility, *given* their utility judgements.

What does knowledge have to do with rationality? The purpose of knowledge is ultimately to provide us with the *know-how* to maximize our utility. Knowledge is what enables us to close the gap between the expected utility and the actual utility. It does this in two ways. It can discipline our expectations of what is likely to happen, as well as our expectations of what will satisfy us. It can help us reach our goals, and can also help us see just how our goals change. To facilitate *know-how* in the above sense, we cooperate with one another. My values may differ considerably from yours, but there are certain means which will be as helpful to you as to me. The adoption of social conventions, even of moral conventions, reflects this dynamic. Philosophical problems require us to adopt conventions which will be rational in the sense of providing each of us with part of the *know-how* to pursue our ends. The philosophical community is asked to come up with conventions for the larger rational community. These conventions are a matter of how to talk, but how to talk is after all crucial to how to act in other ways, to how to treat people, for instance. This is admittedly sketchy, but I am satisfied here with introducing the concept of rationality.

Let us turn now to *convention*. We employed the concept above, but only in what may be termed a preliminary or *propaedeutic* way. There has been some first-rate work on *convention* especially David Lewis' *Convention - A Philosophical Study*. Our notion of convention differs considerably from Lewis' but we will do well to begin with his explication.⁵

According to Lewis, "Conventions are regularities in action, or in action and belief, which are arbitrary but perpetuate themselves

⁵ What we are advocating, here, and what is, if not new, different, is a thorough-going philosophical *conventionalism*. If one seeks precursors, the German philosopher of science Hugo Dingler is an important one. Contemporary German philosopher Paul Lorenzen's *Constructive Philosophy* is the kind of critical or rational conventionalism advocated here. The present paper's differences with Lorenzen's approach are more apparent than real. I would agree for instance, that the theory of rationality sketched above itself needs to be developed (constructed) from the ground up. But to do this here would be to all but lose the *meta-philosophical* focus of the present paper.

because they serve some sort of common interest.”⁶ Or more formally:

A regularity R, in action or in action and belief is a *convention* in a population P if, and only if, within P the following six conditions hold. (Or at least they almost hold. A few exceptions to the “everyones” can be tolerated).

- (1) Everyone conforms to R.
- (2) Everyone believes that the others conform to R.
- (3) This belief that the others conform to R gives everyone a good and decisive reason to conform to R himself.
- (4) There is a general preference for general conformity to R rather than slightly-less than general conformity in particular, rather than conformity by all but one.
- (5) R is not the only possible regularity meeting the last two conditions.
- (6) Finally, the various facts listed in conditions (1) to (5) are matters of common (or mutual) knowledge.⁷

For both Lewis and myself, conventions are regularities with a certain rational quality to them. We do not require that conventions arise from explicit convening or agreement, or that the regularities arise from *rule following*. Lewis certainly does not identify the convention with the rule. In any event, Lewis is far more interested in what keeps a convention going than in how it originated. But Lewis insists that conventions must not be uniquely rational, that there be at least one alternative which would have served the relevant community just as well. Lewis is interested in explicating the *conventionality* of conventions—hence the stress on equi-rational alternatives. I would prefer to call Lewis’ conventions *mere conventions*; morality, for instance, consists of conventions though it is doubtful that fundamental moral principles are *mere conventions*. What we stress is the rationality of the convention, whether it has an equi-rational alternative or not.

III

We can now look at some philosophical problems from the framework we have constructed. Take the frequently asked questions—Can machines think? We might ask what our linguistic

⁶ D.K. Lewis “Languages and Language” in *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, Vol. VII (ed. Gunderson), p. 4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

conventions governing 'thinking' and 'machines' dictate? Or what *will* our linguistic conventions dictate? But these questions are not sufficiently philosophical. They do not get at the heart of the problem. Our original question —*can machines think*— cannot be adequately rendered by the above surrogate questions. It is not a matter of what conventions we *should* adopt. (What should we say?) Normative questions of this sort are ubiquitous in philosophy. Even in the philosophy of mathematics we find questions like —What is the true set-theoretical foundation for mathematics? Does this mean any more than —What set-theory should we adopt? (Or, what theory should we say is the best one?) Philosophical questions come down to requests for linguistic conventions and for the justification of these conventions.

Have we, perhaps, assigned convention and decision *too* prominent a role. We all know that saying something is so does not make it so. Haven't we swallowed the view that questions of truth can be decided by convention? It is not clear whether our original question and our surrogate questions are the same. We have simply replaced one question —a question of truth— with another one —a question of convention. The truth questions seem so innured to successful treatment as they stand that we feel impelled to shift gears. The surrogate question is one we can handle. We need not deny some significance to the original question. The Tarski truth criterion still makes sense. '*A machine can think*' is true iff *a machine can think*. We can perhaps even say that it is either a fact that machines think or a fact that they cannot. (This is more controversial). But the fact in question is like the sound of a tree falling in the forest when no one is there. We *need not* deny the existence of the sound. But its existence does not count for much. There is no way to get at it. We need not deny the meaningfulness of the original question—but we need not take it too seriously either. Truth without means of verification or test is empty. Philosophers will differ as to how much lip-service they wish to pay to truth and questions of truth. Even a modicum of lip service to *truth* might prevent us from falling into the jaws of some form of idealism or exaggerated voluntarism. This is not to say that *truth* is the only such prophylactic. We do not want to exaggerate the power of man, the power of human convention and decision. When a man predicts he will get up at 7:00 A.M. — his predicting the occurrence may indeed help bring it about. But the *self-fulfilling prophecy* case is the exception rather than the rule. Failure even to pay lip-service to truth or objectivity can lead to the very popular true-for-me syndrome. We have all heard people say things like—the existence of God is true for the Pope and other

believers—but it is not true for me. This democratic live and let live attitude is surely toleration *ad extremum*. Whether God exists or not is not a matter of convention. We can, however, make Episcopalianism the state religion. We can make it against the law not to attend church services regularly. We can decide to say prayers in the schools. But our own power is severely limited. The existence of God (or the non-existence of God) cannot be brought about by human convention. The ideal of *truth* or better of *objectivity*, itself serves as convention for carrying out philosophical inquiry. In fact all justification presupposes this ‘super-convention.’⁸

What then is the connection between the *original* (truth) questions and the *surrogate* (convention) questions? The short answer was previously indicated. Philosophical truth questions are often extremely far-removed from the philosophers’ ability to get at the truth. It is as if the truth is in a little black box; but the key to the box is buried in the center of some far off planet in some far off solar system. That the key exists is small comfort. Another way of looking at the situation is this. Science (or, at least part of science) answers factual (primarily factual) questions. Science is unlikely to be able to answer some philosophical questions. Now, we can label these questions “meaningless” or we can luxuriate in the vastness of our ignorance, or we can replace these questions with ones with which we can deal. We permit convention to decide where truth is unlikely ever to challenge it.

This is not a theory of truth by convention; it is rather a theory of convention in lieu of truth, in some cases. We do not advocate hiding the truth. To place convention beyond truth is not to leave room for ‘big lie’ demagoguery. For us truth and convention peacefully coexist. Questions of truth make sense only against a background of convention. Philosophy itself must begin with conventions for the evaluation of conventions. Here we find logic and ethics in close contact with one another and together at the center of philosophical inquiry.⁹

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⁸ For a discussion of this point, see Paul Lorenzen’s, *Normative Logic and Ethics*, Mannheim, 1969.

⁹ In connection with this, see Sir Karl Popper’s treatment of facts and decisions, in his *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, especially pp. 60-61, 234-235.