

## Philosophy, politics, and objective truth

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### Abstract

*Here is a series of statements that illustrates a way in which many philosophers think about truth and falsity. The proposition (thesis, belief) that the Earth goes round the sun is about certain objects, the Earth and the sun; the proposition says that these objects are related in a certain way (the former goes round the latter); it is true because its objects, the things it is about, do stand in the relation it says they stand in. The proposition may thus be said to be objectively true, since the status true is conferred on it by the way things stand with its objects. In a similar way, the proposition that the sun goes round the Earth is objectively false — and was objectively false even when most people believed that the sun went round the Earth. The objective truth or falsity of the things that human beings happen to believe or disbelieve is thus in one very obvious sense independent of whether those things are believed or disbelieved; it is in fact independent of the existence of human beings and their mental states: even if there had never been any human beings — or any other sapient creatures —, it would still be true that the earth went round the sun and false that the sun went round the earth. Philosophers who think of truth and falsity in the way this series of statements illustrates are today called (metaphysical) realists. But not all philosophers are realists. There are also (metaphysical) anti-realists, who hold that, in some important sense, the very existence of truth and falsity depends on the cognitive activities of human (or other sapient) beings. The phrase objective truth occurs in political as well as in philosophical writing. The phrase is central to the thought of one of the greatest of the political writers of the last century, George Orwell. Orwells views on what he calls objective truth are presented in very stark and dramatic fashion in 1984, and particularly in the debate about truth that is the climax of the novel.*

The phrase objective truth is a familiar one, but what does it mean? Let us look at a particular statement, and ask what it would mean to apply the words objectively true to that statement. Copernicus, let us suppose, has said that the earth goes round the sun. What would it mean to say that what Copernicus has said was objectively true? Its clear enough what it means to say that that what he said was true: his statement was true if and only if the earth goes round the sun. But what do we add to this if we say that the statement is objectively true? When you think about it, that would be a rather odd thing to say. At any rate, it would be something someone would say only in very special circumstances. One would probably have to imagine its being said in a context in which the subject under discussion was not astronomy or the history of astronomy in the most straightforward sense, but rather

something like method in the history of astronomy. For example, an historian might say, What Copernicus said was objectively true in exasperation — if some rival historian had been defending some depth-psychological or economic explanation of the fact that Copernicus said that the earth went round the sun.

The lesson of this example, I think, is that the use of the phrase objectively true is generally a kind of reminder: a reminder that there is a world outside us, and that what one says or believes is in most cases true (if it is true) or false (if it is false) in virtue of that world outside us. We have said that what Copernicus said was true just in the case that the earth goes round the sun, and, of course, the earths going round the sun is something external to the human mind (and the suns going round the earth would be something external to the human mind if that state of affairs obtained). When people use the adjective objective in connection with truth, they use it as a reminder that the truth or falsity of what we say and believe does not in most cases depend on our desires or our hopes or our fears or any of our psychological states. If my doctor has told me that there is a cancer growing in my gut, what she has told me may be true or it may be false, but its truth or falsity depends on whats going on in my gut and on nothing else. If I experience a very sincere desire for her statement to be false, that fact is entirely irrelevant to whether it is false. This desire of mine may have consequences for what I believe about the state of things in my gut (such is human epistemological frailty), but it has no consequences for the truth or falsity of those beliefs.

And why is this particular word —objective— used for this purpose? Its use reflects the fact that truth and falsity are conferred on statements and beliefs by their objects, by what theyre about: the earth and the sun and how they move in relation to each other; my gut and whats going on in it. The words objective truth are a reminder that the truth of a belief or statement is entirely a matter of how things are with its object, and has nothing to do with the state of its subject – the person who has the belief or makes the statement<sup>1</sup>.

All this has been prologue. In the play, I want to look at some questions about objective truth in philosophy and in politics. I will begin by considering the views of two people who have had something to say about objective truth, one from the point of view of philosophy and one from the point of view of politics.

One of these two people, I confess, is not strictly speaking a person. He is a composite figure,

<sup>1</sup>Except in the not-too-common case in which object and subject overlap - - for some of our beliefs and statements are about ourselves and our psychological states. If someone says, "I feel vaguely uneasy about this", that statement will indeed be true or false in virtue of the interior condition of the subject, but thats the exception that proves the rule: in that case, the subject of the statement is the object of the statement. We might put this point by saying —and theres no paradox in this— that truth is objective even when its subjective. In Kierkegaards *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Part 2, Chapter 2), the author", Johannes Climacus, famously says, "Truth is subjectivity. In my view, the interesting and important position that Kierkegaard chooses to express in those words has nothing to do with the topics discussed in this paper.

a representative of a certain philosophical school. I will call this abstraction the anti-realist. About sixty percent of him is the late Richard Rorty, but I don't want to identify his views with Rorty's (I'll call him him because he's at least sixty percent male). The anti-realist, as is well known, in some sense denies the existence of objective truth – in some sense denies that there is a status called truth that is conferred on beliefs and statements by their objects. The anti-realist – he is sometimes called the metaphysical anti-realist – is named by reference to his philosophical opponent: the realist (or metaphysical realist) who affirms the existence of objective truth.<sup>2</sup>

The other of the two people I shall be talking about is George Orwell, a very real person indeed. In Orwell's writings the words objective truth (and many closely related phrases, such as external reality) occur very frequently. Here is a representative example of his use of the words. It is taken from his 1942 essay [1], "Looking Back on the Spanish War":

*I saw great battles reported where there had been no fighting, and complete silence where hundreds of men had been killed. I saw troops who had fought bravely denounced as cowards and traitors, and others who had never seen a shot fired hailed as the heroes of imaginary victories . . . This kind of thing is frightening to me, because it often gives me the feeling that the very concept of objective truth is fading out of the world.<sup>3</sup>*

It has long seemed evident to me that the anti-realist and Orwell are talking about more or less the same thing when they refer to objective truth. The concept that Orwell feared might be fading out of the world, and the concept that the anti-realist says corresponds to nothing in the world are, I would have supposed, the same concept. It would not have occurred to me to suppose that the anti-realist was using objective truth in some special, technical sense, some sense peculiar to philosophy, while Orwell was using the phrase in its non-technical, everyday sense, the sense appropriate to controversial political writing. It is certainly true that everyday words and phrases often acquire a special sense in various academic disciplines, philosophy included. Force in politics means controlled violence, directed at coercing or restraining one's opponents. But in physics, force means (at any rate, the net force acting on a body means) the rate at which a body's momentum is changing. Burke says, Freedom and not servitude is the cure of anarchy. Kant says, Causality through freedom is not incompatible with nature [2]. Obviously, Burke is using freedom in the sense appropriate to controversial political writing, and, just as obviously, Kant is using the word in a sense peculiar to philosophy — for something so far removed from Burke's freedom that it exists (so Kant supposes) even in the most abject conditions of what Burke calls servitude. Examples of this sort could be multiplied almost without limit: A computer hacker has stolen Alice's identity vs. Alice's

<sup>2</sup>'Realism' has two other important senses in metaphysics. In one of these two senses, realism is opposed to idealism (the doctrine that everything is either a mind or a collection of ideas in various minds). In the other, realism is opposed to nominalism (the thesis that there are no universals or other abstract objects). Realism-as-opposed-to-idealism should not be confused with the thesis that objective truth exists. George Berkeley was an idealist, for example, but affirmed the existence of objective truth.

<sup>3</sup>The ellipsis represents more than half a page of text, in which examples are multiplied and the ways in which Fascists and Communists distorted the events of the Spanish Civil War are compared and contrasted.

identity consists in the diachronic continuity and connectedness of her mental states — and so on, and so on.

I am, however, convinced that it is at the very least natural to suppose that Orwells and the anti-realists use of objective truth is not one of the many instances of this kind of thing. I think that we can see how natural it is to suppose this if we examine some passages from 1984 [3], a book that can be described as Orwells treatise on objective truth and its political enemies.

The central argument of 1984 is presented in the form of a debate —if the verbal and intellectual component of an extended episode of brainwashing can properly be said to constitute a debate— the debate between Winston Smith and OBrien in the cells of the Ministry of Love. It is natural to read this debate as a debate between a realist (as regards the nature of truth) and an anti-realist. I offer a few representative passages from the book that demonstrate, I believe, that if this is not the only possible way to understand the debate, it is one very natural way. I begin with some thoughts that passed through Winstons mind as he was writing in his diary long before his arrest:

*[...] the very notion of external reality was tacitly denied by [the Partys] philosophy [...] His heart sank as he thought of [...] the ease with which any Party intellectual would overthrow him in debate, the subtle arguments which he would not be able to understand, much less answer. And yet he was in the right! They were wrong and he was right! The obvious, the silly, and the true had got to be defended. Truisms are true, hold on to that! The solid world exists, its laws do not change. Stones are hard, water is wet, objects unsupported fall toward the earths centre. With the feeling that [...] he was setting forth an important axiom, Winston wrote: Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four. If that is granted, all else follows.<sup>4</sup> (Part 1, Chapter 7)*

Let us now look at the debate. Here is an exchange between OBrien and Winston.

*Is it your opinion, Winston, that the past has real existence? [...] You are no metaphysician, Winston [...] Until this moment you had never considered what is meant by existence. I will put it more precisely. Does the past exist concretely in space? Is there somewhere or other a place, a world of solid objects, where the past is still happening?*  
*No*  
*Then where does the past exist, if at all?*  
*In records. It is written down.*  
*In records. And – ?*  
*In the mind. In human memories.*  
*In memory. Very well, then. We, the Party, control all records, and we control all memories. Then we control the past, do we not? (Part 3, Chapter 2)*

And here is a second exchange:

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<sup>4</sup>Since there are many editions and printings of 1984, I will cite passages from the book only by part and chapter. As early as 1939, ten years before the publication of 1984, in a review of “Russells Power: A Social Analysis”, Orwell had written, “It is quite possible that we are descending into an age in which two and two will make five when the Leader says so [1].



*But the world itself is only a speck of dust [...] the whole universe is outside us. Look at the stars! Some of them are a million light-years away. They are out of our reach forever. What are the stars? [...] They are bits of fire a few kilometres away. We could reach them if we wanted to. Or we could blot them out. The earth is the centre of the universe. The sun and stars go round it [...] For certain purposes, of course, that is not true. When we navigate the ocean or when we predict an eclipse, we often find it convenient to assume that the earth goes round the sun and that the stars are millions upon millions of kilometres away. But what of it? Do you suppose it is beyond us to produce a dual system of astronomy? The stars can be near or distant, according as we need them [...] [...] a faint smile twitched the corners of OBriens mouth as he looked down at [Winston]. I told you, Winston”, he said, that metaphysics is not your strong point. The word you are trying to think of is solipsism. But you are mistaken. This is not solipsism. Collective solipsism, if you like. But that is a different thing; in fact, the opposite thing [...] (Part 3, Chapter 3)*

These passages, I think, show that it is natural (which is not to say that it is right) to read 1984 as a defense of realism. I have myself read the book this way. (And, of course, as part and parcel of reading it that way, I regarded Winston as representing the authors point of view.) In my book *Metaphysics* — a book whose intended audience was readers who came to the book with no clear idea of the meaning of the word metaphysics — I wrote:

*Before we leave the topic of Realism and anti-Realism, however, I should like to direct the readers attention to the greatest of all attacks on anti-Realism, George Orwells novel 1984. Anyone who is interested in Realism and anti-Realism should be steeped in the message of this book. The reader is particularly directed to the climax of the novel, the debate between the Realist Winston Smith and the anti-Realist OBrien. In the end, there is only one question that can be addressed to the anti-Realist: How does your position differ from OBriens? (Van Inwagen 2002, 84-85)*

If I did not say in this passage that Orwell was a metaphysical realist, I certainly strongly suggested that I regarded him as one, and I will now explicitly say that I do regard Orwell as a metaphysical realist. In a much more nuanced way, Rorty has also drawn a connection between Orwell and realism (see chapter 8 in [4]).

At any rate, Rorty does not approve of the vocabulary that Orwell uses when he defends what he, Orwell, calls objective truth — that phrase itself being one of Rortys least favorite items in anyones vocabulary. It is not my purpose in this paper to examine Rortys way of reading 1984 — that is, his attempt to rescue what he regards as valuable in the book (its depiction of a social order dedicated to the infliction of pain as an end in itself) from its entanglement with Orwells unfortunate conviction that the idea of objective truth needed to be defended and was worth defending. (At one point Rorty compares the way he approaches 1984 to the way he would, as an atheist, approach *Pilgrims Progress* — a book he thinks can be read with profit by those who do not share its presuppositions.) I simply call attention to the fact that both Rorty and I see some connection between Orwell and realism.

In a very long essay in the volume “Rorty and His Critics”, James Conant has contended that it is wrong to read 1984 as an attack on anti-realism and wrong to read the debate

between O'Brien and Winston Smith as a debate about the nature of truth [5]. According to Conant, Rorty and I are both obsessed with the realism/anti-realism debate, and our common obsession has led us to ignore the fact that Orwell's purposes in defending objective truth were political and in no way philosophical. Orwell (Conant maintains) had been repelled by the kind of thought-control that British left-intellectuals of the 1930s and 40s had applied to one another with respect to the history of their time — for example, with respect to the events of the Spanish Civil War and the arrests and trials in the Soviet Union during the Yagoda and Yezhov eras. Orwell's purpose in writing *1984* — Conant tells us — was to depict a society in which this thought-control had been taken to its logical conclusion (I will remark that I agree with Conant's judgment that Orwell wanted to depict a state in which certain intellectual habits current among the British intelligentsia at the time of writing were demanded, on pain of torture and death, of everyone but the Lumpenproletariat. It is entirely possible that the title *1984* is an allusion to the year of the novel's composition — 1948). There is nothing philosophical, nothing metaphysical, in this purpose, Conant says. But because van Inwagen (a realist) is obsessed with the realism/anti-realism debate, he is led to read the novel as a defense of a metaphysical thesis — and to see it as a stick with which he can beat anti-realists. Because Rorty (an anti-realist) is obsessed with the realism/anti-realism debate, he misreads Orwell's purely political use of vocabulary like objective truth and the solid world as something that calls for a philosophical response from anti-realists — not a refutation, of course, but a reading of the novel that de-emphasizes or re-interprets such phrases and thereby makes what is valuable in the novel accessible to anti-realists.

I'll let Rorty defend himself against Conant's charge. (He has<sup>5</sup>). I myself think that the charge is all wrong. I want to defend the view that the novel is — in a certain sense, which I'll try to spell out — a defense of a metaphysical thesis. I want to continue to use *1984* as a stick with which to beat anti-realists. I want to insist that the sense in which Orwell uses objective truth is the only sense there is — and, therefore, that that sense is the only sense of the phrase available to the anti-realist. And that one sense is the sense I spelled out in my opening remarks. Winston, for example, believes that he had seen airplanes before the Revolution — despite the Party's claim to have invented the airplane after it came to power. And — within the fictional background history of the novel — his belief is objectively true and the Party's claim is objectively false. Winston's belief is true since there were airplanes before the Revolution, and its truth is objective in the sense that it is conferred on the belief by its object: a certain period of past time and the things that existed, in serene indifference to the Party's present claims, during that period.

Conant contends that this simple sense of objective truth is not the sense of the words that figures in philosophical debates between realists and anti-realists. But then what is that sense? Conant has not neglected this question. Far from it. His answer is both lengthy and subtle. He lays out eight realist theses<sup>7</sup>, and declares that anyone who accepts even one

<sup>5</sup>“Response to James Conant”, in Brandom, pp. 342-350.

of them is a realist of some sort. Realism, according to Conant, is as much genre-term in philosophy as it is in art or literature. Realism is not a philosophical doctrine or thesis, but rather a genre to which certain philosophical doctrines and theses belong. Some among his eight realist theses are in fact inconsistent with some of the others (a fact that Conant lays some stress on), and that implies that two philosophical doctrines that contradict each other can be equally good examples of the genre realism.

I certainly agree with Conants contention that 1984 is not a polemic against theses like the eight theses that (he says) define the philosophical genre realism. At any rate, I agree with it as a judgment about certain words Conant has written, the words that he has used to formulate the eight realist theses (I agree that if Orwell had opened a book that started with words like those, he would have very quickly proceeded to close it). I cant agree with it as a judgment about theses, however, because there are no such theses. That is to say, the words Conant has written formulate no theses at all. They are mere words — although, since they consist of syntactically correct declarative sentences, they have the appearance of words that express theses. I am sorry if I have begun to sound like a logical positivist talking about Hegel or Heidegger. I do not, like Carnap and Neurath and the rest, have a theory according to which all philosophy but my own and that of a few like-minded colleagues is meaningless. Nor do I have a theory according to which everything that has been said by the practitioners of some major division of philosophy —metaphysics, for example— is meaningless. I repudiate any general theory that classifies some large part of philosophy as nonsense, and I shrink from sounding as if I were offering one. Nevertheless, I insist that philosophers do sometimes say meaningless things, things that (to borrow the words that Wolfgang Pauli applied to a conjecture presented by a fellow physicist) are not even false. For example: Being is; not-Being is not (Parmenides); The world is a progressively realized community of interpretation (Royce); A self is a logical construct out of sense experiences (Ayer). Since I have no general theory of meaninglessness in philosophy —since I repudiate the possibility of such a theory— if I wish to show that some piece of philosophical text is meaningless, there is nothing I can do but examine it sentence by sentence (even clause by clause) and try to show that theres just nothing there, nothing but words: that in that piece of text there are no theses and no questions, that what might appear to be theses and questions are only words.

I cannot go through Conants eight realist theses sentence by sentence, examining the meaning of each sentence and enquiring as to its meaning. I will illustrate my point by examining just one piece of text, his statement of the first of the eight theses:

*The thesis that the Thing-in-Itself is a condition of the possibility of knowledge. All our experiences of the world are of appearances, views of it from some particular point of view. The only sorts of truths we are able to formulate are truths about the world under some description. But we should not mistake the limitations of our knowledge, imposed on us by our finite cognitive capacities, for limitations that are inherent in the nature of reality as such. The idea that our experience is of the world (that appearances are appearances*



*and not mere illusions) – that is that there is something which our descriptions are about – presupposes the idea that there is a way which is the way the world is in itself. For the world to be a possible object of knowledge, there must be such a way that it is, apart from any description of it – a way that the world is when viewed from nowhere, that is from no particular point of view (or, alternatively, from a Gods-eye point of view). Moreover, though such knowledge of the world (as it is in itself) is in principle unobtainable for us, we are able to think what we cannot know: we are able to grasp in thought that there is such a way the world is, apart from the conditions under which we know it. It is only by postulating the existence of such a noumenal reality that we render coherent the supposition that all our apparent knowledge of reality is indeed knowledge of a genuinely mind-independent external reality (Conant pp. 271-272).*

These words simply bewilder me. They should bewilder anyone. How shall I (in Quines fine phrase) evoke the appropriate sense of bewilderment? I can do nothing to that end but provide a clause-by-clause commentary on this passage, and I have no time for that. Ill content myself with an examination of the clauses that make up a single sentence from this passage: For the world to be a possible object of knowledge, there must be [a way that the world is in itself], apart from any description of it.

For the world to be a possible object of knowledge. Probably this means, for anything to be a possible object of knowledge. The modern science of cosmology treats the physical world – if not the world – as a single, unified object and attempts to gain knowledge of it (something that Kant said couldnt be done). But I dont think that Conant means this phrase to bring to the readers mind the issue of treating the world as a whole as an object of knowledge. I think that the phrase should be understood as introducing a general thesis about possible objects of knowledge. Lets pick a particular object – the Arc de Triomphe will do. What does the following sentence mean?

*For the Arc de Triomphe to be a possible object of knowledge, there must be a way that it is in itself, apart from any description of it.*

I suppose that “the way the Arc de Triomphe is” is an oblique way of referring to the properties (attributes, characteristics, features, qualities, choose what word you will) of that monument. If so, our task is to understand this sentence:

*For the Arc de Triomphe to be a possible object of knowledge, there must be properties that it has in itself, apart from any description of it.*

In this sentence, there are two puzzling adverbial phrases: in itself, and apart from any description of it. I do not understand these adverbial phrases. Lets take them in their turn. What does this mean:

*The Arc de Triomphe has, in itself, the property of being in the center of the Place de ltoile?*

How does saying this differ from saying that the Arc de Triomphe has (without qualification)



the property of being in the center of the Place de l'toile? There are all sorts of adverbs and adverbial phrases that can meaningfully be used to qualify has when its object is a property: apparently, essentially, and according to popular belief, for example, but in itself is not one of them. If something has a property, it is of course it that has that property — I just said so. The only use of in itself that I know of in the history of philosophy that brings anything at all to my mind has to do with secondary qualities. (I am aware of Kants use of the phrase an sich, but this phrase, I have to say, doesnt bring anything at all to my mind.) Thus: The Arc de Triomphe is said to be white, but, really, it doesnt have that property in itself; whiteness is simply a quality that exists in the minds of its observers. I consider that statement to be a boring sophistry, long exposed. But suppose Im wrong. Suppose its the sober truth. Then theres no sense in which the Arc de Triomphe has the property of being white. It just isnt white. Things in our minds are white (or perhaps whiteness is a free-floating quality that exists in our minds but is not a quality of anything), but the Arc de Triomphe isnt white, and theres an end ont. But if it isnt white, it nevertheless has other properties: it has at least such properties as not being white and being colorless. Does it have those properties in itself? The question makes no sense.

Let us turn to apart from any description of it. What does this sentence mean?

*The Arc de Triomphe has, apart from any description of it, the property of being in the center of the Place de l'toile.*

An adverb or adverbial phrase is supposed to answer a question of some sort. In this case, the question, whatever it may be, would pertain to the Arc de Triomphe's possession of a certain property. Here is a straightforward example of an adverbial phrase in this position:

*The Arc de Triomphe has, all the guidebooks tell us, the property of being in the center of the Place de l'toile.*

In this case, the question the adverbial phrase answers is According to whom (does it have that property)? But what question does apart from any description of it answer? None is apparent. None is apparent because there is none. The adverbial phrase, although it violates no rule of syntax, has no semantical connection with the words that surround it. I might compare this sentence to these two sentences (also syntactically unobjectionable):

*James Conant has, apart from any visits he has made to San Francisco, the property of being the editor of The Cambridge Companion to John Dewey.*

*The Earth has, apart from any Serbian traffic regulations, the property of orbiting the sun.*

I suppose I could imagine our conversational circumstances in which there would be a point to uttering sentences like these, but, apart from some vastly improbable context of utterance, they are simply puzzling. They are puzzling because, owing to the lack of any discoverable connection between the adverbial phrases apart from any visits he has made to San Francisco

and apart from any Serbian traffic regulations and the other parts of the sentences in which they occur, one can discern no question about Conants editorship or the orbit of the earth for them to supply answers to.

The role of apart from any description of it in the sentence The Arc de Triomphe has, apart from any description of it, the property of being in the center of the Place de Itoile is therefore a puzzle. It is, in fact, a puzzle without a solution. Anyone who thinks that this sentence means anything is under an illusion. What is the source of this illusion? Could it be some argument along these lines?

To say that the Arc de Triomphe has the property of being in the center of the Place de Itoile is to describe it; therefore, it does not have that property apart from any description of it. More generally, for no property that we ascribe to any object does that object have that property apart from any description of it.

And perhaps anyone who finds this argument persuasive will want to say that apart from any description of it means apart from any possible description of it, and will contend that it is only those properties of  $x$  that are inexpressible in principle, inexpressible in any possible language, that  $x$  has apart from any description of it.

Is the thesis that objects have some of their properties apart from any description of them the thesis that some properties of each object are inexpressible in any possible language? That is an interesting thesis. I have no idea whether its true, but, true or not, it does not seem to be the thesis that Conant means to be putting forth as one example of the genre realism. That thesis, after all, is supposed to have some connection with the idea of the thing-in-itself, and the thesis that there are things-in-themselves is simply not the thesis that things have properties that cannot be expressed in any language. I have no real understanding of the words the doctrine of the thing-in-itself but I have a certain negative grasp of the phrase, and that is sufficient for me to be sure that no one who claims to understand it would say that the thesis that things had inexpressible properties entailed (much less was identical with) the thesis that there were things-in-themselves.

To say that the Arc de Triomphe has properties that it is impossible in principle to ascribe to it (and if that were true, how could anyone possibly know that it was true?) tells us nothing about what it might mean to say that it has those (or any) properties apart from any description of it— not in any sense that is relevant to understanding the beliefs of realists, at any rate. It is of course true that ex hypothesi no reference to any linguistically inexpressible property will figure in any description any possible speaker applies to the Arc de Triomphe, but, supposing there to be realists who say that the Arc de Triomphe has those (or any) properties apart from any description of it, that fact does not tell us what they mean by apart from any description of it. What then do these (perhaps fictional) realists mean by

this phrase? The answer is the obvious one: they don't mean anything by it. It is just words. Words, words, words", as Hamlet says.

In the end I have to say that I feel not the slightest temptation to believe that language like "If our experience of the world constitutes knowledge, then there must be a way the world is in itself, apart from any description of it makes any sense at all. And I feel the same about most of the sentences that make up Conant's statements of the seven other realist theses."<sup>6</sup>

I am, therefore, not a realist in Conant's sense, for there is no such sense to be a realist in. I am a realist only in the simple-minded sense of the word that I laid out in my opening remarks (and those remarks parallel the way I characterized realism in *Metaphysics*, the book in which I said, "In the end, there is only one question that can be addressed to the anti-Realist: How does your position differ from O'Brien's?"). If there were some other sense in which one might be a realist, I expect I'd be a realist in that sense, too. But, so far as I am aware, there is no other relevant sense that can be given to the word realist.

And I think it is obvious that Orwell was a realist in that sense. I don't think Conant would dispute that. I think it is obvious that Orwell believed that truth and falsity are statuses conferred on the things we believe and the things we say by and only by their objects — by what they're about.

One might of course want to know more about these two statuses, more about truth and falsity. Might it not be that I mean something arcane and metaphysical by truth when I speak about truth as a philosopher, something different from what a journalist and political writer like Orwell — or an historian or an ordinary person immersed in the ordinary business of life — means by truth? My answer is No: truth is one; there is only one concept of truth, and it is the common property of the philosopher, the political writer, and the shopkeeper. Truth has only one meaning.

What, then is this concept? What does truth mean? As a general rule, I am more comfortable with almost any other grammatical category than abstract noun. Accordingly, I shall discuss the meaning of the adjective true and not the meaning of the abstract noun truth. In my view, anything that can be said by using the noun can be said, and can usually be said more clearly, by using only the adjective — although sometimes only at the expense of prolixity and stylistic awkwardness. I contend that statements like "In war, truth is the first casualty" and "Plato is a friend, but truth is a greater friend" can be paraphrased, without loss of real content, in terms of the adjective true. The former, for example, can be paraphrased as a

<sup>6</sup>I understand bits and pieces of some of them, but the bits I understand all pertain to two rather special topics, morals and history. I don't think that the bits of his eight theses that I understand, taken individually or taken together, can be said to provide a statement of a general doctrine, a doctrine that applies to human thought and discourse in general, a doctrine that could be called realism full stop and not simply realism concerning X. I should say, too, that, although I call myself a realist, I don't find the bits I understand particularly plausible.

rather lengthy statement to the effect that in time of war, the authorities will adopt the policy of making public statements about matters relating to the course of the war that they know are not true (I concede that the result of the paraphrase wont be likely to find its way into any dictionary of quotations). And the statement that truth and falsity are objective can be paraphrased, without loss of content, as the statement that some of the things we say and believe are true and others of them false, and that if something we say or believe is true (or, it may be, false) its being true (false) is a consequence of how things stand with its object and of nothing else.

Very well, then: what does true mean? When I paraphrased Truth and falsity are objective in terms of the adjective true, in what sense was I using the adjective? Was I using it in some recondite metaphysical sense, a sense distant from the sense in which it is used by those who, like Winston Smith, are no metaphysicians?

Let us look at an example. In my opening remarks, I said that it was clear enough what it meant to say that Copernicuss statement The earth goes round the sun was true: his statement was true if and only if the earth goes round the sun. But Ill confess now that this was a bit of a fudge, since to affirm that A if and only if B is not to affirm that B is what A means. After all, a plane figure has three sides if and only if it has three interior angles, but I doubt whether anyone would want to say that having three interior angles is what having three sides means.

Can we do better? Does the philosophical tradition offer anything better? One traditional theory of truth tells us that The proposition that the earth goes round the sun is true means this: The proposition that the earth goes round the sun corresponds to reality. (Im going to use the convenient word proposition —beloved of philosophers— as a general term for things that can be said or believed.) And, more generally, the traditional theory tells us that is true, when applied to any proposition, means corresponds to reality. The theory I am referring to is of course the famous correspondence theory of truth. According to the correspondence theory, corresponds to reality is a genuine analysis of the meaning of is true— just as is the locus of all points equidistant from a given point is a genuine analysis of the meaning of is a circle.

It must be conceded, however, that the proposed definition is obscure, for its far from clear what corresponds to reality means. How can we define that phrase? — for it certainly cannot be used without a definition. I know of only one possible way of defining corresponds to reality that is any clearer than corresponds to reality itself. I present this definition in the form of a schema:

*The proposition that p corresponds to reality if and only if p.*

This expression is a schema in this sense: it endorses any statement one can get from it by

substituting the same declarative sentence for both occurrences of the schematic letter  $p$ . For example:

*The proposition that the earth goes round the sun corresponds to reality if and only if the earth goes round the sun.*

Whatever the merits or demerits of this definition may be, it has one rather obvious consequence, to wit that if our only interest in the phrase corresponds to reality is to use the phrase in defining true, there is no need to bother with corresponds to reality at all. We might as well have used the same trick to define true right at the outset. The definition would consist in this schema:

*The proposition that  $p$  is true if and only if  $p$ .*

Is this an adequate definition of true? I think not. For one thing, it faces a criticism of a sort we have already encountered: the if and only if versus means the same as criticism. The proposition that the earth goes round the sun is certainly true if and only if the earth goes round the sun. But that undoubted fact does not imply that The proposition that the earth goes round the sun is true means the same as The earth goes round the sun. But even if this criticism can be evaded or is somehow mistaken, the definition faces a more serious problem. It is certainly a defensible position that all the instances of the schema – for example:

*The proposition that the atomic number of iron is 26 is true if and only if the atomic number of iron is 26. The proposition that Tokyo is the capital of Mexico is true if and only if Tokyo is the capital of Mexico.*

are, well, *true*<sup>7</sup>. The proposed definition is inadequate, I contend, but not because the schema that is at its core has false instances. Its rather that that schema does not provide a definition of true but (at best) only of one rather special phrase containing this adjective, to wit the proposition that ... is true. And the word true does not always occur within that phrase. Consider, for example, sentences like:

*What Bill told us about Monica was not true.  
Some of the things Dean said about Nixon were true and some weren't.*

One can believe, even know, things of the sorts expressed by these sentences and have no idea what Bill told whoever it was about Alice, or what the various statements Dean made about Nixon were. I could put the problem that this fact creates as follows. Suppose we were trying to program a computer to pass the Turing test (the test is to be administered in English). One thing we should have to teach the computer was how to use the word true the way human English-speakers do, for true is a word that English-speakers frequently use. And it wont suffice to include in our program something corresponding to the schema The

<sup>7</sup>Defensible but not undisputed. Those who dispute it would point to cases like The proposition that the square root of 2 weighs four kilos is true if and only if the square root of 2 weighs four kilos and The proposition that it is morally wrong to lie is true if and only if it is morally wrong to lie.

proposition that  $p$  is true if and only if  $p$  – and we shall not improve matters all that much if we go on to include in the program other schemata of the same sort, in which words like statement, belief, hypothesis, thesis and so on occur where proposition occurs in that schema. Doing only that much will leave the computer helpless when it has to respond to statements like, What Bill told us about Monica was true.

In my view, the problem of defining true is unsolved at present and is probably insoluble. I don't think I can explain my reasons for thinking this to anyone who isn't at least a well-instructed amateur in the philosophy of logic. With some misgivings, I'll present the argument, and those who don't fall into this category can relax and allow their minds to wander for two minutes (if they are not already in that condition). I assure them that what I shall say during the next two minutes is not essential to my larger argument.

I am convinced that true is probably indefinable because I accept a certain view of quantifiers and variables – essentially Quine's view of quantifiers and variables. According to this view, the only variables are nominal variables, variables that occupy nominal positions. If this is so, then what Dorothy Grover and others have called propositional quantification (I prefer quantification into sentential positions) is impossible. That is to say, expressions like

$$\forall p \exists q (p \rightarrow q) \tag{10.1}$$

make no sense. If Quine is right about the nature of quantification – and I am convinced that he is – the meaningful sentence that comes closest to saying the thing this meaningless sentence is trying to say (I hope you understand that) must contain nominal variables whose range is the bearers of truth-value (sentences Quine would say; propositions I say) and a truth-predicate. The meaningful sentence that comes closest to saying the thing this meaningless sentence is trying to say is this one:

$$\forall x \exists y \quad (\text{the conditional whose antecedent is } \underline{x} \text{ and whose consequent is } \underline{y} \text{ is true}). \tag{10.2}$$

Now why is this thesis of Quine's about the nature of quantification relevant to the problem of defining true? The answer is not far to seek. If there were such a thing as quantification into sentential positions, then, every schoolboy knows, it would be possible to define true. And here's the definition (assuming that the predicate is true applies to propositions; let those who say that this predicate applies to sentences modify this definition as they will)<sup>8</sup>:

$$\underline{x} \text{ is true} \mid =_{\text{df}} \exists p \quad (p \ \& \ \underline{x} = \text{the proposition that } \underline{p}) \tag{10.3}$$

<sup>8</sup>Those who wish to construct a parallel definition of is true as a predicate of sentences face the problem of self-referential or liar sentences (see [6], particularly p. 162). In my view, the problem can be overcome, or evaded, in the case in which is true is defined as a predicate of propositions. But since I reject the possibility of defining is true as a predicate of propositions on other grounds, I need not defend this thesis.

But this definition is not available to anyone who (like Quine and me) finds no sense in the idea of variables that occupy sentential – or any non-nominal – positions. The definiens, we say, is a meaningless sentence. And what do we say is the meaningful sentence that comes closest to saying the thing this meaningless sentence is trying to say? We say its this sentence:

$$\exists \underline{y} \quad (\underline{y} \text{ is a proposition} \ \& \ \underline{y} \text{ is true} \ \& \ \underline{x} = \underline{y}). \quad (10.4)$$

And  $x$  is a true proposition means  $x$  is identical with some true proposition is hardly an adequate definition of true proposition! It is for just this reason that I say that no definition of true is possible. I have, of course, examined only the sort of definition of true that is in some sense a generalization of sentences like The proposition that the earth goes round the sun is true if and only if the earth goes round the sun. I concede that there are other possibilities. For present purposes I will say only that I doubt whether true can be defined and that I certainly dont want to accept any position that depends on the assumption that true can be defined.

Now Id like everyones attention again. If I am right, if true cannot be defined, does that mean that we dont understand the word? That does not follow, for it is obvious that we know the meanings of words that cannot be defined. That this is so is a logical consequence of three obvious facts: a definition is a statement of equivalence of meaning between a definiendum and a definiens, each of which is a word or a phrase; there are a finite number of meaningful words and phrases (that any human being can grasp, at any rate); a definition must not be circular. So: if we understand any words or phrases, we understand some of them in the absence of any definition. Perhaps true is one of them. And it seems evident that we do understand true, whether we can define it or not. If you understand what someone is saying when he utters the English sentence, “Some of the things Dean said about Nixon were true and some werent”, then you understand the predicate is true. And if you understand enough English to have been able to follow what I have been saying in this paper, you certainly understand that simple sentence.

It is, I contend, just this ordinary sense of is true, definable or not, that is the common property of philosophical and political writers – and of them and that abstraction that Oxford philosophers used to call the man on the Clapham omnibus.

My thesis is that, when true is understood in this ordinary sense (and theres no other way to understand it), objectively true is a redundant phrase: a proposition (belief, statement, thesis, hypothesis, conjecture, theory, ...) is objectively true just in the case that its true. For those who like slogans: Every proposition entails its own objective truth. Here are two of the many statements of which the slogan is an epitome:

*If Mt Everest is 8,849.87 meters high, it follows that its objectively true that Mt Everest*

*is 8,849.87 meters high;*

*If San Marino is larger than Russia, it follows that its objectively true that San Marino is larger than Russia.*

An immediate consequence of this thesis is that its impossible to affirm anything, to make any assertion whatever, without saying something that implies the existence of objective truth (that implies that at least one proposition is objectively true).

And this applies to statements of the anti-realist thesis. If the anti-realist says, for example, "Nothing anyone ever says is objectively true", what he has said immediately implies the statement, "It is objectively true that nothing anyone ever says is objectively true." Now this statement is not, in the strict sense, a logical contradiction. It would, for example, be true if no one ever said anything, which is certainly a possible state of affairs, and a logical contradiction is true in no possible state of affairs. But its the next best thing to a logical contradiction, so to speak. It is what philosophers of language call a pragmatic contradiction (never mind why they call it that). Simpler examples of pragmatic contradictions are, "San Marino is a republic and I do not believe that San Marino is a republic" and "No one ever makes any statements." A pragmatic contradiction is, roughly speaking, a statement that, although it may be free from internal logical contradiction, is logically inconsistent with anyone making it. No position, in philosophy or in any other area of intellectual endeavor, is coherent if it involves those who adopt it in a pragmatic contradiction. And —this is my thesis— anti-realism has just this feature. It is a position that no one can coherently adopt — for the same reason that "No one ever takes any position on anything" is a position that no one can coherently adopt.

This indictment applies to OBriens school of anti-realism and Rortys with equal force (if they are indeed different schools). Consider, for example, OBriens statement, "The earth is the center of the universe." It follows from that statement that its true that the earth is the center of the universe, and objectively true is just a long-winded way of saying true.

Now suppose someone —"I do not say Conant", just someone— were to reply as follows. "Yes, yes, no one would disagree with you about any of that stuff. And, yes, some at least of your theses are the theses that Orwell wanted to defend. But theyre not metaphysical theses."

I suppose Id have to ask that person what he thought a metaphysical thesis was. The theses I have put forward are certainly not empirical theses — with the exception of some of the theses Ive used as examples. When I advance these theses, what I say cannot be refuted by observation or experiment. My theses thus have the feature that the logical positivists used as the touchstone of metaphysics. They are, moreover, theses about a concept, truth, that is as general a concept as there could be. If I tell you that everything Professor X says in his new book is true, that statement will give you no clue whatever as to what the book is about. Is it about epistemology, number theory, geology, tax law, the history of Tuscany, ...? The



word true is like the words and and whether and is; it is what the Oxford philosophers of the fifties called a topic-neutral word (if someone crosses out all the words in a treatise but the topic-neutral words, a reader who examines the defaced text will have no way of knowing what the subject of the treatise is). A predicate that is formed from a topic-neutral adjective like true is as general a predicate as a predicate can be. Such a predicate would seem to be at least a good candidate for the office predicate of interest to metaphysicians.

Am I contending, then, that Orwell was interested in metaphysics? Well, certainly not as a discipline, not as an area of theoretical enquiry. But he was interested in and accepted certain theses that I, at any rate, insist are metaphysical theses, and he thought that what people believed about these theses was tremendously important – which is not to say that he would have been at all interested in the arguments metaphysicians have used to attack or defend them. (If you presented him with a summary of Rorty's views on truth, he would very likely have said something along the lines of, One has to belong to the intelligentsia to believe things like that: no ordinary man could be such a fool.<sup>9</sup>)

Here is something that Orwell once said that illustrates how a person with no theoretical interest in metaphysics can have beliefs about matters that metaphysicians dispute about – and can find reason to appeal to these beliefs in an essay on politics. This is from Orwell's *The Lion and the Unicorn*; his topic is the historical continuity of England: What can the England of 1940 have in common with the England of 1840? But then, what have you in common with the child of five whose photograph your mother keeps on the mantelpiece? Nothing, except that you happen to be the same person [1]. The last sentence presupposes a view of personal identity that has been disputed by great philosophers. Many metaphysicians would follow Hume and say that the adult reader of *The Lion and the Unicorn* and the child of five were simply not identical with one another; a modern, scientific philosopher like Reichenbach, who took more or less the Humean line, would say that the adult reader and the child were two distinct temporal segments of an four-dimensional space-time worm (I am sure that Orwell knew, in a purely intellectual sort of way, as a matter of obscure historical fact, that Hume and other philosophers had had various things to say about personal identity across time, but I don't suppose that any thoughts about Hume or philosophy were in his mind when he wrote the words I have quoted). Other metaphysicians would agree with Orwell in his contention that the adult and the child were the same person – but these metaphysicians fall into several camps and, when they can spare time from arguing with the Humeans, argue endlessly with one another about what it is for a person who exists at one time to be identical with a person who exists at another time. Orwell would certainly not have been interested in their interminable debate (The subtle arguments which he would not be able to understand, much less answer? Despite what some have said, I'm sure he was able to understand them, insofar as there is anything in them susceptible of being understood. It's just that he would

<sup>9</sup>I concede that that famous remark – it has been variously misquoted – was actually directed at a straightforwardly political thesis: that American troops had been brought to Europe not to fight the Germans but to crush an English revolution [1].

have considered it a waste of his time to try to understand them). But although he would not have been interested in the debate, he did in fact accept at least one of the theses the debate was about.

Or so I say. Other philosophers will insist that none of the theses that would figure in a four-way dispute about personal identity among Derek Parfit, Roderick Chisholm, David Lewis, and myself were theses that Orwell either accepted or rejected or had so much as entertained. They will say that when Orwell said you happen to be the same person”, what he was saying was something that the four metaphysicians were in agreement about. And someone —I do not say Conant”, just someone— might say the corresponding thing about what Orwell was saying when he said, Facts exist independently of us and are more or less discoverable”: that this statement is something that all the parties to the realism/anti-realism debate agree on, and that the points on which they disagree would have been of no interest to Orwell.

Well, perhaps so. All I can say is, if realism is not the thesis that facts (some facts, at any rate) exist independently of us, I do not know what realism is (I take Facts exist independently of us to be another way of saying that truth exists independently of us; that is to say, truth is objective). And if anti-realism is not the denial of the thesis that facts exist independently of us, I do not know what anti-realism is. And if the question whether facts exist independently of us is not a metaphysical question, I do not know what a metaphysical question is.

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