



TELLING THE TRUTH AND THINKING IT

MORTIMER ADLER

The word “truth” has been used over and over again in the two preceding chapters. Since those chapters are about the way the mind works and about thinking and knowing, it is quite natural that reference to truth and falsity should have been frequent. When we know something, what we know is the truth about it. When we try to think correctly and soundly, our effort is to get at the truth.

I thought it possible to use the words “truth” and “falsity” (or “true” and “false”) without explaining what they mean because everyone does understand what they mean. They are common notions, commonly used. The question “What is truth?” is not a difficult question to answer. After you understand what truth is, the difficult question, as we shall see, is: How can we tell whether a particular statement is true or false?

The reason why I say that everyone, as a matter of common sense, understands truth and falsity is that everyone knows how to tell a

lie. Every one of us has told lies on one occasion or another, and everyone understands the difference between telling a lie and telling the truth.

Let us suppose that I think a certain restaurant is closed on Sunday. On a Sunday morning, you ask me whether that restaurant is open for dinner that evening. I tell you that it is. For the moment, let us not be concerned with the reason why I lied to you. My lying consisted in saying in words the very opposite of what I think. I said that a certain restaurant is open for dinner when at the same time I think it is not open.

To say “is” when you think “is not”—or to say “is not” when you think “is”—is to tell a lie. To tell the truth is the very opposite of this. It consists in saying “is” when you think “is,” and “is not” when you think “is not.”

An American philosopher who taught at Harvard University at the beginning of this century wittily remarked that a liar is a person who willfully misplaces his ontological predicates. “Is” and “is not” are what he meant by ontological predicates. A liar, in other words, is a person who intentionally puts “is” in place of “is not,” or “is not” in place of “is.” To tell the truth, then, is to have what one says in words agree with or conform to what one thinks. To lie is not to say in words what one thinks, but the very opposite of it.

As I said a moment ago, everyone understands this. All I have done is to spell out, as explicitly as possible, what everyone understands. I have done so as preparation for Aristotle’s simple, clear, and common-sense answer to the question about what makes our thinking true or false.

His answer is that, just as telling the truth to another person consists in an agreement between what one says and what one thinks, so thinking truly consists in an agreement between what one thinks and what one is thinking about. For example, if I am asked whether Christopher Columbus was a Spaniard or an Italian, I think truly if I think he was an Italian and falsely if I think he was not an Italian.

This one example suffices for an understanding of Aristotle’s explanation of what makes our thinking true or false. We think truly (or have truth in our mind) if we think that that which is, is; or that that which is not, is not. We think falsely (or have falsity in our mind) if we think that that which is, is not; or that that which is not, is.

In the case of telling the truth to someone else, the agreement is between what we say in words to another person and what we actually think. In the case of thinking the truth, the agreement is between what we think and the facts as they are. Truth consists in a correspondence between the mind and reality.

We express most of our thoughts in words, whether we are speaking to ourselves or to someone else or writing our thoughts down in some fashion. Not all the thoughts we express orally are either true or false. Aristotle points out that questions are neither true nor false; nor are the requests we make of others, nor, the commands we give. Only declarative sentences—sentences that contain some form of the words “is” and “is not,” or that can be rephrased to contain those words—are true or false.

This should not seem surprising in view of the fact that Aristotle’s understanding of what makes a statement true lies in its agreement with the facts of the matter. Declarative statements are the only statements that try to describe the facts—the way things are. Only such statements can either succeed in doing so or fail to do so. If they succeed, they are true; if they fail, they are false.

It would appear, then, that statements that are prescriptive rather than descriptive cannot be either true or false. A prescriptive statement is one that prescribes what you or I ought to do. How can a statement that says that I ought to devote more time to reading books and less to playing games be true or false if truth and falsity in the statement of our thoughts consist in an agreement between what we assert or deny and the way things are or are not?

Being able to answer that question is of great importance. If there were no answer to it, statements about the goals we ought to aim at in life, and about the means we ought to employ in order to reach them, would be neither true nor false.

Everything we learned from Aristotle about the pursuit of happiness (in Part III of this book) might still be interesting as an expression of Aristotle’s opinions about such matters. But he could not claim, and I could not claim, truth for his recommendations about what we ought to do in order to achieve the good human life that we are under a moral obligation to try to achieve.

Aristotle obviously thought that his teaching about the good life and how to achieve it was true. Therefore, he must have had an answer to the question about the truth of statements that contain the words “ought” or “ought not.” He did. He said that, just as a

descriptive statement is true if it agrees with or conforms to reality, so a prescriptive statement is true if it agrees with or conforms to right desire.

What is right desire? It consists in desiring what one ought to desire. What ought one to desire? Whatever is really good for a human being. What is really good for a human being? Whatever satisfies a human need.

The statement that a person ought to desire whatever is really good for himself or herself is a self-evident truth. It is self-evident in the same way that the statement that a part is less than the finite whole to which it belongs is self-evidently true. Just as it is impossible for us to think of a part that is greater than the whole to which it belongs, or of a whole that is less than any of its parts, so it is impossible for us to think that we ought not to desire that which is really good for us, or that we ought to desire that which is really bad for us.

Among our human needs is the need for knowledge. Knowledge is really good for human beings to have. Since right desire consists in desiring what we ought to desire, the statement that we ought to desire knowledge conforms to right desire. Because it conforms to right desire, it is true, according to Aristotle's theory of what makes a prescriptive statement true.

We have just taken the easiest step toward answering the question about how we can tell whether a statement is true or false. A statement such as "A finite whole is greater than any of its parts" reveals its truth on its very face. As soon as we understand the terms that make up the statement—"whole," "part," and "greater than"—we immediately see that the statement is true. It is impossible to understand what a whole is, what a part is, and the relation of greater than, without at the same time understanding a whole to be greater than any of its parts.

There are not many statements we can make that are self-evidently true in this way. The statement that what is really good ought to be desired is one of them. But its truth is not as manifest as the truth about wholes and parts because it is easier for us to understand wholes and parts than it is to understand the distinction between real and apparent goods and the distinction between what ought to be desired and what is in fact desired.

We sometimes call statements self-evident that are not self-evident. When we do so, we usually wish to recommend them as generally

acceptable truths—acceptable without any further argument. That is what Thomas Jefferson did when he wrote, in the Declaration of Independence, that “we hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights,” and so on. These statements may have been accepted as true by the signers of the Declaration and by others, but a fairly extended argument would have been necessary to establish their truth.

What I have just said indicates another way in which we can tell whether a statement is true or false. If it is not self-evidently true, its truth may be established by argument or reasoning. According to Aristotle, the truth of some statements can be demonstrated in this way. Two conditions are required for the demonstration or proof of a statement’s truth. One is the truth of the premises used in the reasoning. The other is the correctness or validity of the reasoning itself.

Let the statement be: “The United States is larger than the State of New York.” Two premises are needed to establish its truth. One is: “A whole is larger than any of its parts.” The other is: “The United States is a whole, of which the State of New York is one part.” From these two statements, it follows that the United States is larger than the State of New York. The premises being true, the conclusion that follows from them is also true.

Just as very few statements can be seen by us to be self-evidently true, so also very few can be seen by us to be true as a result of valid reasoning from true premises. The truth of most of the statements that express what we think is not so easily determined. In most cases, we remain in doubt about whether a statement is true or false. When we are able to resolve our doubts, we do so by appealing to the evidence afforded us by the experience of our senses.

For example, if we are in doubt whether a certain building is twelve or fifteen stories tall, the way to remove that doubt is to look at the building and count its stories. A single, relatively simple observation will tell us whether a statement about the building’s height is true or false.

The appeal to observation is the way to determine the truth of statements about things that are perceivable through our senses. You may ask whether we can trust our senses. Not always, but the way to check our own observation is to have it confirmed or corroborated by the observation of others.

For example, as a result of my own observation, I may make the statement that the automobile that crashed into the wall was going very fast. Other witnesses of the same event may have to be appealed to in order to get at the truth of this matter. If all of them report the same observation, it is probably true that the automobile was going very fast when it crashed. The more witnesses who agree on this point, the more probable it is.

A statement that is only probably true has the same truth that is possessed by a statement that we regard as certainly true. Either the auto was going very fast or it was not. A statement about its speed is either true or false. When we say that a statement is only probably true, we are not estimating the degree of its truth. We are assessing our own degree of assurance in claiming truth for it.

Degrees of probability are not measures of the truth of a statement, but only measures of the assurance with which we can determine its truth. A truth that we affirm with certitude, such as the truth about wholes and parts, is no more true than a truth that we regard as only probable, such as the truth about the speed of the auto that crashed.

Some witnesses are qualified to make observations that help us to determine the truth of statements; some are not. For example, as a result of my own observation, I may say that the ring on your finger is gold. It may, of course, look as if it were gold and still be only gold plated. It is difficult, if not impossible, to tell which it is by unaided observation. Even an experienced jeweler would not give you an opinion about this just by looking at or handling the ring. The jeweler knows there are ways of determining the real character of objects that look as if they are made of gold. By putting your ring to the appropriate test and by observing the result of it, the jeweler, as an expert witness, can say whether my original statement about the ring is true or false.

So far we have considered statements about particular objects—statements about the height of a certain building, about the speed of a certain automobile, about the metal of a certain ring. The truth of such statements can be checked by observation. Sometimes, as a result of observation, our own or the observation of others as well, we can be relatively sure about the truth of the statement under consideration; sometimes, we are left unsure.


Observation seldom gives us the certainty we have about the truth of statements that are self-evidently true or that can be established as true by valid reasoning. I say “seldom” rather than “never” be-

cause, according to Aristotle, some simple statements about observable objects are as evidently true as some general statements are self-evidently true. That there is a piece of paper in my typewriter as I am writing this sentence is immediately evident to me. I do not need the confirmation of other witnesses to assure me of the truth of my statement about this observable fact. I am as certain of its truth as I am of the truth of the statement about wholes and parts.

We are left with a large class of statements that we call generalizations from experience, such statements as “All swans are white” or “All Eskimos are short.” Since it is impossible for us or anyone else to observe the color of all swans, or the height of all Eskimos, observation by itself cannot establish the truth of these generalizations.

A number of observations may persuade us that the generalizations are probably true. The larger the number of observations, the more we may be persuaded. Increasing their number can only increase the probability. It can never result in certainty that the generalizations are true.

However, we can be certain that a generalization is false, even if we can never be certain that it is true. I pointed out in the preceding chapter that the statement “Some swans are black” or even the statement “This swan that I am observing is black” contradicts the statement “All swans are white.” Contradictory statements cannot both be true. The truth of my observation that this one swan is black falsifies the generalization that all swans are white. In the light of that one observation, I know with certitude that the generalization is false.

Aristotle’s answer to the question about how we are able to tell whether a statement is true or false can be summarized by saying that we are able to do so by appealing to experience, on the one hand, and to reason, on the other hand. Sense perception provides us with one way of checking the truth or falsity of statements in question. In addition, Aristotle recommends that we always consider the opinions of others before making up our own minds—the opinions held by most men, or by the few who are experts, or by the wise. 

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

Is published weekly for its members by the

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor
Ken Dzugan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.
Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.