belief is, of course, not necessarily a true or a justified belief; but an inconsistent belief is an absolute non-starter. It should never come as a surprise that people habitually unmindful of considerations of consistency should be found to be careless about the grounds for belief and impartiality in action. It must be taken, then, that the philosopher's insistence on consistency in thought and talk has deeper springs than mere intellectualism.

8

Truth as opinion

The problem of truth has been touched upon in various ways in the last four chapters. I wish in this chapter to confront directly the question 'What is Truth?' which was posed but not answered in the preceding chapter. The thesis which I am going to advance, as the reader will probably have inferred from the title of this chapter, is that there is nothing called Truth as distinct from opinion. As this sounds paradoxical, it will not be amiss to preface my argument with a little discourse on common sense and philosophical paradox. And I cannot think of a better way of introducing this subject than by recounting an anecdote which seems to me to be especially interesting in the present connection. I once gave John Dewey's book *How We Think* to an intelligent person quite innocent of technical philosophy to read, saying that in my opinion it contained excellent philosophising. After reading somewhat less than two thirds of the book, he returned it to me complaining that he was expecting to be furnished with profound thoughts but found the book to be filled, page after page, with nothing but commonplace remarks whose truth was so obvious that he could not understand why anybody could think it important to put them into print. After initial unsettlement, I was rather pleased by his comment as it seemed to be a concrete confirmation of a good point which Dewey himself was accustomed to make, namely, that a lot of the things he used to say were so obvious that he would not have insisted upon them so industriously were it not that many philosophers habitually denied them, if only by implication.

One would naturally and immediately want to ask: 'If the matters in question were so obvious then how do you account for the circumstance that many philosophers were disposed to dispute them?' In attempting to answer this question, I should like to call attention to the fact that what is obvious is apt to become extremely unobvious when subjected to protracted reflection. The problematic arises, and can only arise, from the unproblematic. A problem always relates to the significance of something taken as settled. In the philosophically interesting cases common facts are found to pose problems of significance the investigation of which leads us to form ideas of great abstractness, or to institute very general distinctions. There is, of course, no reason why the theoretical ideas and distinctions thus generated should be obvious. Nevertheless, it is required that philosophical ideas should not contradict, but rather illuminate, the facts of common experience. It happens, however, that when carefully examined some ideas proposed by philosophers will be found to conflict with obvious facts of everyday experience. This is possible because abstract ideas are apt to live a life of their own, spurning, as it were, 'the base degrees by which they did ascend'. It then becomes relevant to rehearse, as clearly as possible, the common facts in question and to indicate their relation to the more speculative ideas to which they give rise. This corrective function John Dewey fulfilled with unsurpassed competence.

The point of particular interest for our present purpose in all this is as follows: The theoretical abstractions which I have just alluded to are often to be encountered not only in philosophical treatises but also in everyday thought or common sense, and the principal difference between them lies in the greater elaboration and the technical sophistication of the former. For this reason, the denial of some philosophical theories may also imply the denial of certain common-sense conceptions. When that happens, we speak of a philosophical paradox. Since the kind of common-sense ideas we speak of here may be *in principle* as abstract and interpretative as their corresponding philosophical theories, there is no particular difficulty in the notion that even deeply ingrained common-sense beliefs may sometimes conflict with the facts of common experience. So it need not be a paradox to suggest that the motivation for denying common sense may be a desire to attain in thought greater harmony with common experience.

Let us now turn to an example: the phenomenon of visual illusion. It is a common fact of experience, surely, that we sometimes believe ourselves to perceive things as having certain properties which they do not, in fact, have. Scientifically, such

occurrences are susceptible of fairly straightforward explanations in terms of the position and/or the state of the viewer, physiological or psychological. But the very fact that such explanations are available seems to compel us, even in our ordinary common-sense thinking, to institute an abstract and quite speculative distinction between *Reality*, that is, things as they are in themselves and *Appearance*, that is, things as they appear to us in our individual transitory, 'subjective' states. In confirmation of this, moreover, we are apt to reflect that things must exist and have their own natures when not being observed. In this way we seem led to the conception that the nature of things is independent of the cognitive relation between the knower and the known; independent, in other words, of the fact that anybody may come to perceive them.[1] And this, I take to be a conception very deeply embedded in common-sense thinking about the world in general.

There exist philosophical theories which adopt this common-sense conception, subtilising and developing it in varying degrees and directions. But against all such theories there is an objection which, to my mind, is conclusive. The objection is that it is a logical consequence of any such theory that it is impossible ever to know things as they are. For, any claim to know any given object as it really is in itself, will, on the view in question, merely be a report of how a certain thing appears to a certain observer or group of observers in some specific 'subjective' state. Indeed, any claim to know something *as it is in itself* would be a contradiction in as much as it would amount to a claim to know something *as it cannot be known*. But this consequence of the theory, which, remember, is originally a common-sense conception, flatly contradicts our premise that we sometimes perceive things as having certain properties which they do not, *in fact*, have. This premise, which is an indisputable datum of common experience, clearly implies that we can sometimes know things as they are. As the theory thus contradicts a common fact of experience, it must be false.

What then is the alternative? The only alternative, as it seems to me, is to restore the cognitive relation to reality. It was, at any rate, partly with this purpose that the British philosopher, Bishop

[1] Kant made this distinction one of the corner-stones of his *Critique of Pure Reason*. See pp. 133–7 of the next chapter for some further remarks on Kant on this subject.

Berkeley, in 1710 propounded his remarkable paradox that for physical things, to exist is the same as to be perceived. History has not been kind to him, as in arguing for his principle of *esse est percipi* Berkeley mixed it up with another quite separable thesis to the effect that to be a physical or, in his own word, 'sensible', object is to be a sensation,[2] and his critics have been unable to separate the two doctrines, and so have visited the opprobrium thought to attach to the latter upon the former. In consequence, attempts to refute Berkeley's contention that to be is to be perceived have always, to my knowledge, displayed *ignoratio elenchi*, the fallacy of arguing to the wrong point. After repeatedly offering the final refutation myself of the paradox in undergraduate and post-graduate exercises, I am now of the opinion not only that it is irrefutable, but also that it is in close harmony with common experience. I am even ready to defend it in a somewhat more general form: I should say that *for anything whatever*, to be is to be apprehended.[3] I shall, however, proceed here to argue only a special case of this principle, namely, that to be true is to be opined.

The steps by which I seek to recommend this contention about truth are exactly parallel to the steps we have just gone through. It is an incontestable fact of common experience that we sometimes know some propositions to be true and at other times make mistakes as to the truth. From this fact common sense is apt to infer that, since our opinions may fall short of the truth, we must draw an absolute distinction between truth and opinion. In philosophical development, this conception becomes an objectivist theory of truth. Truth is then said to be independent of, and *categorially* different from, opinion. Two things are said to be categorially different from each other if something which when said of one of them is either true or false becomes, when said of the other, neither true nor false but inappropriate or even meaningless. According to the objectivist theory, it makes sense to say that a man's opinions may change but it is meaningless nonsense to say that the truth itself may change. Once a proposition is true, it is true in itself and for ever. Truth, in other words, is timeless, eternal. Advocates of this view are not unaware of such apparent exceptions as that it may be true at time t_1 that it is raining but no longer true at time t_2 that it

[2] On the separateness of the two theses see pp. 132–3.
[3] This position is argued in the next chapter.

is raining as the rain may have stopped before then. Such cases are easily accounted for as follows: What is said to be true is not the strictly incomplete proposition 'it is raining', but the full proposition 'it is raining at time t_1 at place p_1'. If such a proposition is true, then, according to this conception, it obviously does not make sense to suggest that it might come to be false at a different point of time or space.

This theory about truth, however, goes aground on an objection which may by now be apparent. It is this: If truth is categorially different from opinion, then truth is, as a matter of logical principle, unknowable. Any given claim to truth is merely an opinion advanced from some specific point of view, and categorially distinct from truth. Hence knowledge of truth as distinct from opinion is a self-contradictory notion. But this consequence contradicts the fact of common experience from which we started, namely, that we sometimes know some propositions to be true. Therefore the objectivist theory must be incorrect.

To attempt to escape this conclusion by appealing to *correspondence* with *fact* as the criterion of truth would be of no avail, for that something is a fact must remain nothing more than an opinion.[4] Nor would any reference to perception help, for that any given perception is veridical is still an opinion. For the same reason no alleged faculty of direct apprehension such as intuition can serve. Now, it is an essential fact about opinion that an opinion is necessarily a thought advanced from some specific point of view. Hence, in the case of truth as in our previous case of 'Reality', we must recognise the cognitive element of point of view as intrinsic to the concept of truth. Truth, then, is necessarily joined to point of view, or better, truth is a view from some point; and there are as many truths as there are points of view.

Very likely certain obvious and, perhaps, not so obvious linguistic facts will prevent instant acceptance of this suggestion. The word 'opinion' is often used in such a way as to suggest uncertainty. One contrasts established fact with mere opinion. I do not, of course, mean 'opinion' in this sense. An established fact is simply an opinion felt to be secure from some individual point of view or set of points of view. What I mean by opinion is a firm rather than

[4] The correspondence theory of truth is beset by various other difficulties some of which are discussed in chapter 10, section III, especially pp. 154–8.

an uncertain thought. I mean what is called a considered opinion. The word 'opinion' is also often used to refer to attitudes to situations as opposed to factual accounts of them, but here I treat of opinion as to facts. Another likely cause of objection is the ambiguity of the term 'truth'. Quite frequently, the word 'truth' is used to express not the cognitive concept of veridicality but the moral idea of veracity. When political orators and public guardians of morality praise truth, we may be sure that what inspires their passionate eloquence under the heading of truth is not so dry a topic as the cognitive concept of truth but rather the more sublime subject of honesty or truthfulness. The Akans have separate expressions for the two senses of the word 'truth'. '*Nokware*' is the word which they use to express the moral sense of 'truth'. Literally, '*Nokware*' means 'one voice', the idea being apparently that truthfulness consists in saying to others only what one would say to oneself. For the cognitive concept of truth the Akans use not one word but a phrase which may be translated as 'what is the case' or 'what is so'. I venture to suggest on autobiographical grounds that attention to their own vernaculars by Africans in their speculative thinking may often yield useful dividends in philosophical clarity. In the English language, nothing is easier than to confuse the two concepts of truth which I have just distinguished, which often makes it possible for the careless or disingenuous to import overtones of righteousness into the discussion of purely cognitive matters. In this discussion, my primary concern is with the strictly cognitive concept of truth.

Coming to a somewhat more logical level, we may anticipate an objection to the view I am advocating which at first sight may seem conclusive. The following argument is likely to be urged: Suppose two people maintain two mutually contradictory propositions. Then, if there are as many truths as there are points of view, both propositions must be true. But of two mutually contradictory propositions only one can be true. (For example, it cannot be both true that $2 + 2 = 4$ and that $2 + 2$ does not equal 4.) Therefore, the view that truth is opinion implies a contradiction. This objection fails, however, because it does not hold fast enough to the element of point of view in the concept of truth. A contradiction arises only when two mutually inconsistent propositions are asserted from *one and the same point of view*. If '$2 + 2 = 4$' is held true from one point of view and '$2 + 2$ does not equal 4' is held true from another point of view, there is no reason except lack of logical sophistication why a third point of view should hold both propositions true. In claiming to deduce such a contradiction from our conception of truth, our hypothetical objector simply does not bother to ask himself from what points of view the two contradictory propositions are supposed to be presented.

A variant of this objection is as follows: 'If there are as many truths as there are points of view, then the opinion of the fool will be as good as the opinion of the wise; which is absurd.' In inferring that the opinion of the fool will be as true as that of the wise, our wise man has forgotten to distinguish between his point of view and that of the fool and so has inadvertently displayed an affinity with him.

Another version of the objection is that if truth were nothing but opinion, anybody would be at liberty to believe whatever nonsense he pleases. The authors of the objection are presumably to be understood to hold themselves up as shining exceptions, which shows little logical acumen but rather more self-congratulation. Nonsense is nothing but one man's opinion forcefully declared by another to be defective in a particular way. Whatever theory of truth holds or may come to hold the field, some people will continue to consider nonsensical what others embrace as wisdom.

It may be helpful to note in this connection that 'belief' as I am using it is not a matter of will but of reason. One cannot reasonably say 'the evidence is in favour of proposition P but I choose to believe the opposite', or even 'I do not know any reason for or against P but I choose to believe it'. The psychologist and philosopher William James, once wrote a famous essay entitled 'The Will to Believe'. This somewhat over-suggestive title led many people to form the impression that James intended to suggest that believing was a matter of will and that one could believe anything which one found pleasing or advantageous. As a matter of fact, his main contention was only that when an issue of truth or falsity cannot be decided on intellectual grounds then, if acting *as if* the relevant proposition is true offers more advantages and fewer dangers, it is reasonable to act so. It is an unfortunate fact that when James himself came to apply his general principle to the specific matter of religious faith he failed to observe rigorously the distinction between actually believing a proposition and merely acting as if the proposition were true. But, at all events, the distinction is a clear one. Accordingly, any anxiety (genuine or feigned) that my theory could imply that people might believe anything that caught their fancy irrespective of their own appraisal of relevant evidence or arguments can be finally put to rest.

I can still imagine some objector insisting: 'Surely $2 + 2 = 4$; and that is the truth of the matter. If anybody believes anything to the contrary, he is wrong. He is simply misled by false opinion; and that is that. Nothing can change the obvious fact that there is such a thing as false opinion and that, therefore, truth cannot be identical with opinion.' This objection shows that the lesson about the logical importance of the concept of point of view as an element in the concept of truth value (i.e. truth or falsity) is still not learnt. It is not, of course, disputed that a proposition held to be true from one point of view may be held to be false from another. The phrase 'false opinion' only refers, with perhaps tendentious brevity, to the complex occurrence of assertion and counter-assertion. My contention is that it can mean nothing more. I too am reasonably confident in the belief that $2 + 2 = 4$ and that anybody who holds the contrary is mistaken. But I cannot help recognising that this is simply to affirm my belief and express my disagreement with any contrary belief. Neither the fact that I hold a given opinion nor that many reputable people share my opinion can transform it into something of a different category from opinion, and I must confess that the objectivist conception of truth often strikes me as an intellectualised sublimation of somewhat more primitive passions of the human soul.

Aside from any speculative psycho-analysis, however, reference to the phenomenon of assertion and counter-assertion brings us to the consideration of a rather important aspect of our subject. A counter-assertion is an assertion which contradicts another assertion to which it is a response. Let us take the liberty of using the term 'co-assertion' to mean an assertion which agrees with another assertion to which it is a response. Counter-assertion and co-assertion clearly involve comparison of assertions. Suppose we

bring the two topics under the one comprehensive heading of 'comparative assertion'. Then, I contend that the concept of truth is relevant only to comparative contexts. Truth and falsity are concepts whose whole essence consists simply in indicating the agreement or disagreement of one point of view with another, antecedent or anticipated.

Although we are accustomed in common language to speak of the pursuit of truth in a manner which suggests that the aim of all rational investigation is the truth, a little reflection will show that this is a case where common speech is apt to be philosophically misleading. In the primary sense the aim of rational investigation is always to solve a problem or determine an issue one way or another. This, as we shall soon see, is not identical with seeking to determine the truth or falsity of a statement.

In reflecting upon this matter let us not be too impressed by what is standardly said. Rather, let us attend to what is standardly done and check what is said against what is done. As a preliminary to this exercise, we note that it does not make sense to speak of a question or problem as being either true or false. What is susceptible of truth or falsity is a judgment, statement, opinion, belief, assertion. Let us suppose that we are confronted with a problem occasioned, not by a statement advanced from some antecedent point of view, but by our own observation of phenomena, and that so far we have formed no judgment or opinion. At this stage there is nothing about which to predicate truth or falsity. To resolve the issue before us, we do not shut our eyes and 'assert' anything that comes into our heads. Such simplicity of approach is, I dare say, not dreamt of even in the most whimsical philosophy. We undertake an inquiry, investigation, or research. Let us take it that in this given case, we are able to bring our investigation to a successful close. This means that we are able to construct a judgment or form an opinion. Now I ask: can there be for us, at this concluding stage of our investigation, any question of truth or falsity?

I am aware that some may be disposed to answer: 'Yes, of course, there is a question of truth or falsity. After all, rational men seek not just any opinion, but the opinion that coincides with the truth.' That this answer will not do is easily shown by means of a concrete case. Take a rather serious example. Suppose a murder has been committed and that we make an investigation and come to the firm opinion that Mr X did it. I again ask the reader to consider whether after arriving at this definite judgment it would be reasonable or, indeed, even consistent, to go on to say: 'Very well, we are now going to investigate whether it is true or false that Mr X did it.' Surely such a speech presupposes that one has not yet arrived at a firm conclusion. One does not first construct a firm judgment and then ask whether the judgment is true or false.

There is a temptation, to which many logicians have succumbed, to infer from the foregoing consideration that to assert firmly: 'Mr X committed the murder' is equivalent to asserting that the statement that Mr X committed the murder is true.[5] But this temptation ought to be resisted, for it obscures a subtle distinction which is implicit in a number of remarks already made. To say of a statement 'P' that it is true, presupposes that a statement is antecedently available. But in our hypothetical case we are on our own, struggling to form a judgment without the benefit of prior counsel. Therefore a conclusion of the form 'the statement that Mr X committed the murder is true' cannot be appropriate. A statement of this form is in the nature of what we have called a comparative assertion. By contrast, a statement of the form 'Mr X committed the murder' may be called a primary judgment. Not to resist the temptation just referred to would mean confusing a primary judgment with a comparative one. If we call an inquiry which terminates in a *primary* judgment a primary inquiry and one which terminates in a comparative judgment a *comparative* inquiry, then

[5] This remark applies to the theory of truth advanced by the English logician Frank Ramsey in 1927 in a paper on 'Facts and Propositions' in *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume VII*, July 1927, reprinted in Ramsey, *The Foundations of Mathematics*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1931. He argued that 'it is evident that "It is true that Caesar was murdered" *means no more* than that Caesar was murdered, and "It is false that Caesar was murdered" *means* that Caesar was not murdered' (*Foundations*, p. 142; my own italics). From considerations of this sort, he concluded that 'if we have analysed judgment, we have solved the problem of truth' (*ibid.*, p. 143). The view of truth I am putting forward has a basic affinity with Ramsey's in spite of the reservation expressed. Ramsey's view has come to be known generally as the Redundancy Theory of Truth, for it followed from it that 'It is true that' and 'It is false that' are redundant phrases which, in Ramsey's words, 'we sometimes use for emphasis or for stylistic reasons, or to indicate the position occupied by the statement in our argument' (*ibid.*, p. 142). The theory of the Polish logician Alfred Tarski, which is known as the Semantic Conception of Truth, also obscures the distinction mentioned in the text. On Tarski's theory of truth see chapter 12, pp. 197–201.

the position at which we have arrived is that the concept of truth belongs not to the domain of primary but rather to that of comparative inquiry.[6]

Notice, however, that there is an intimate relation between the two types of investigation. The substantive problem of a comparative investigation is exactly identical with that of a corresponding primary investigation. To try to determine whether 'it is true that Mr X committed the murder' is, in substance, the same as trying to find out whether Mr X committed the murder. Nevertheless the two enterprises are not identical in their antecedents or in the logical structure of their results. The comparative inquiry is a response to the challenge of a pre-existing judgment, and its appropriate outcome is a judgment on a judgment. The primary investigation is, by contrast, a response to the challenge of a problematic situation and leads to a direct judgment on that. The relation between them, however, is obviously such that, whenever a primary judgment is made, a corresponding comparative judgment is automatic, *given an appropriate context*. It is this circumstance which seduces incautious reasoners into the error of supposing that every rational inquiry aims at truth. On the analysis given, it should, I fancy, be clear by now that truth belongs only to a comparative context wherein to be true is to coincide with a corroborative point of view.

The objectivist theory, which is also the prevalent conception of common sense, is, accordingly, to be rejected. But do we thereby reject objectivity and embrace subjectivism? Actually, the subjective/objective distinction apparently so beloved of intellectual controversialists is an exceedingly tricky one. It is rare indeed to find it employed with any rigour outside philosophy or even inside it. I regret that I cannot in the present discussion enter into an analysis of this matter. I can here only state my own opinion rather baldly. It seems to me that in the way of opinion, that is objective which is in

[6] I am thinking here of the concept of truth as it is used in ordinary discourse. In truth functional logic, however, the truth value *truth* belongs to the domain of primary, rather than to comparative, inquiry. In that logic, truth is that which, being added to a function (i.e. a content representable by a participal phrase), converts it into a declarative sentence. I have discussed the primary and the comparative concepts of truth in my 'Truth as a Logical Constant, with an Application to the Principle of Excluded Middle', *Philosophical Quarterly*, October 1975. The next paragraph in the text above may be taken as a clarification by implication of the relation between the two concepts of truth.

conformity with the principles of rational inquiry,[7] these in their turn, being susceptible of a naturalistic account.[8] Objectivity does not require that an abstract principle should be erected into an abstract object. Objectivity, in other words, ought not to be confused with objectivism.

So far, I have argued my thesis on what may *broadly* be called logical considerations. I now wish to make one or two moral remarks. First, however, a disclaimer: the morality of an opinion has not the slightest tendency to prove or disprove it. But, if logical grounds are independently adduced against a position, as I hope I have done in this case, then reference to moral consequences may serve to induce a legitimate sense of the practical urgency of the issue.

The concept of absolute truth appears to have a tendency to facilitate dogmatism and fanaticism which lead, in religion and politics, to authoritarianism and, more generally, to oppression. I do not say that this is a necessary consequence of that conception. Indeed, if human beings were always consistent, the doctrine of absolute truth should, as suggested earlier, lead to total scepticism rather than to dogmatism. Besides, it is not here suggested that all advocates of the idea in question are dogmatic or fanatical. It is a fact, nevertheless, that in matters of truth and falsity, drastic persecution is hardly conceivable without pretensions to absolute truth on the part of the persecutors. It is difficult to think that men could imprison and even kill their fellow men for doctrinal differences with a free conscience if they understood clearly that, in doing so, they were acting simply on their own fallible opinions. It is a totally different thing when people believe that they are in the service of absolute truth, particularly if they imagine that the destiny of a nation, or even, perhaps, of the whole of mankind, is in question. There is no end to the mischief and cruelty of which they are capable. Yet, translated into the terms of my theory, such assertions as 'The Truth will prevail'; and 'The Truth is on our side', amount to no more than 'Our opinions will prevail' or 'My opinions are on my side.'

On the practical plane, then, the identification of truth with

[7] See chapter 4, pp. 56–8 for more on the subjective/objective distinction.

[8] John Dewey, in his *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, attempted to give such a naturalistic account of the principles of rational inquiry.

opinion may be interpreted as a prescription for open-mindedness. This quality of mind consists not in affecting uncertainty but in recognising one's liability to error. Dogmatism, obversely, consists not just in expressing one's opinions with positive conviction but in the unwillingness or refusal to offer evidence for them or to consider objections with a view to revising them. Scientific practice, if not always the theory of it, has long been informed by an attitude of fallibilism. I dare say that the Humanities will never become completely humane until those disciplines are thoroughly imbued with a sense of the intrinsically human character of truth.

Let me conclude on a note of apparent anti-climax. That truth is nothing but opinion is itself nothing but an opinion; and should my argument prove fair game for a critic, I should rejoin with F. C. S. Schiller: 'Sufficient unto the day is the Truth thereof!'