

An Introductory Note for Truth-Seeking and its Discontents

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One aim of our Conference is to reach an understanding of the polarising forces mobilising against, or towards, but also often strangely indifferent to, some of the most sophisticated procedures of truth-seeking the human species has been able to develop. These notes are an introduction.

Part 1. A little like a fable

Across all levels of human organisation, from private thoughts to the edges of our species' current outer-spatial range, uncertainty, anxiety, and aggression are increasing. Yet, in a not-too-distant past, aspects of our future seemed assured. The presumption of a widespread - if tacit - acceptance of the precepts below is a case in point...

The question of what counts as truth and knowledge...

Ushering in the modern era, the fundamental rules of logic, combined with criteria for what is required of observation, were identified and promoted. They were seen as necessary for any claim for truth to qualify as knowledge. Truth was understood to be a statement referring to something that is the case. The recommended principles of thought and conduct included:

- Claims to knowledge must aspire credibly to a true description of its object.
- Claims to truth - and therefore to knowledge also - are subject to tests and judgements appropriate to the character of their object. The verdict or judgement of truth or error is reached according to accepted combinations of theoretical, methodological, observational, and wherever feasible, experimental criteria.¹
- Even when found to be in the direction of the truth of 'what is the case', the understanding proposed should retain a certain degree of provisionality: its degree commensurate with the nature of the object and the sureness of the method of study required to study it.
- There is an understanding that truth will be propagated, and error repudiated, or at least, quietly laid to rest.

These precepts required several thousand years of gestation before their eventual birth in the modern era. They needed countless, now mostly forgotten, individuals to stretch their minds to the utmost.² What each asked of his or her own mind led to one of our species' most remarkable collective accomplishments: namely to arrive at and to take on

¹ For a better statement, see Bertrand Russell...

² Carefully researched world histories of religion, philosophy & science, describe the stages of the arduous route in which sophisticated epistemological principles requiring much psychological restraint and discipline grew out of primitive superstition and belief in magic.

trust, understandings of reality that go beyond and indeed often flatly contradict our immediate senses, and yet can be shown to be closer to the true reality of what exists.³

Some practitioners of the arts, humanities, and psychoanalysis began to fear this form of truth-seeking and treated it as the prerogative of the physical sciences. They saw prejudices against other truths.

However, unbeknownst to them, others in these same lines quietly developed their own versions of truth-seeking. These also proved potent. With the careful methods of scholarship, they questioned much of what was previously undoubted. In the world of the Judeo-Christian Old Testament, Job cursed God and questioned his Goodness. In a marketplace, Nietzsche had his Superman tell bystanders that God is dead. They did not take him seriously. A few years later in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky had a hallucinatory Devil confide to Ivan that he, the Devil, is agnostic as to whether God really exists.⁴

Not far away, in Ancient Greece, King Oedipus became arrogant when he ordered that the Truth must be found whatever the cost. But it was intolerable to him. Yet when Freud wrote in his letter to Fliess, *In this house on July 24, 1895, the Secret of Dreams was revealed to Dr. Sigmund Freud*, he is ironic.

However, notwithstanding Freud's insights and those of many other scholars and scientists, violence, always present, began to build up. It menaced many branches of knowledge and their expertise, technologies, and practitioners, although humanity's dependence upon them had increased beyond all measure.

It began to be thought possible that unbridled consequences of 'what-is-the-case' truth could threaten continents of belief with disintegration. Aggression, fear of abandonment, thirst, starvation, inglorious death and resentment may overwhelm the remaining capacities to contain their threat to *A Sense of Reality*.⁵ In despair, many retreat into silos. Others wonder if remaining open to understanding might help...

Part 2. Some psychoanalytic ideas that might apply

Stories such as that above are devices used to build and communicate models sometimes with genealogical implications. They are assembled from observations, theories, and conjectures about how the phenomena with which they are concerned *might* have arisen and *might* be playing out. My effort leans on several psychoanalytic originals. For example, Freud's in *Totem & Taboo*⁶, Bion in several places but

³ Thus, it became that if you wished to fly you used to get on a plane, and not be in fear of falling to your death; or even now, you can walk, if not on water, then at least by using a bridge with only a sheet of glass between your feet and the Thames below.

⁴ Williams, Rowan (2008) *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith & Fiction* Baylor University Press

⁵ Berlin, I. (1996) *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and their History*, Chatto & Windus, 1996. Pimlico.

⁶ Freud, S. (1913). *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics* (1913 [1912-13]). SE23 vii-162.

particularly on his chapter, *Lies and the Thinker*⁷ in *Attention and Interpretation*, but also on philosophers such as Nietzsche and Bernard Williams in his *Truth and Truthfulness*.⁸ Such stories have links with myths.⁹

The remainder of this brief introduction lists some loosely connected points perhaps providing some orientation for the many observations, postulates, and understandings with which this Conference will be concerned.

- Truth and truth-seeking, and therefore an understanding of appetites for untruth, are central to psychoanalysis, which is a late form of the Delphic maxim, 'Know thyself'. For many of us, there is a pressing need to know one's own truth and falsehoods; also those of one's parents. There is also a need to be known by others. In its absence, we do not fare well.
- The psychoanalytic approach to truth and knowledge, untruth, error, and lie is that they are integral to the character of our early and later object relations. Their character has to be understood in detail. Edna O'Shaughnessy puts it concisely, 'it is not so much 'the lie' but a lying object ; equally, not so much 'the truth' but a true person'. Thus, the truths with which psychoanalysis is concerned are the truths and lies of persons about themselves, those of their objects, and in relation to others.
- Freud's positing of a Pleasure Principle and a Reality Principle is still a good place from which to begin. For example, a sense of reality, and therefore a sense for truth, is essential to Klein's account of the transition from the paranoid-schizoid position to the depressive position. Through maturation, the child realises that loved good objects and bad, hated, and feared objects are one and the same: in this new view, there is a more realistic correspondence between the child's psychic reality and the fact of having one mother and not two.
- Psychological transitions requiring shifts from articles of belief to items of knowledge depend on the extent of the capacity to mourn what is lost in the process.
- Because our knowledge of the world and its figures is acquired through bodily object relations, it is imbued not only with symbolic meaning but with symbolic equations. For this reason, we have a conception of 'the Truth' as if it were one of Plato's forms: 'Truth is Beauty, Beauty is Truth, Earth is Mother. That is all ye need to know....' Or in another vein, 'Knowledge is Power'. These equations are thought to have their beginnings in our experiences of feeding.
- Great emotional difficulties stand in the way of finding and accepting certain facts. They involve bearing the difficult emotions of guilt, shame, and humiliation. Inner persecution – an early form of guilt – may lead individuals to commit crimes: Freud's "a criminal from a sense of guilt".

⁷ Bion, W.R. (1970). *Lies and the Thinker* Chapt,11 in *Attention and Interpretation: A Scientific Approach to Insight in Psycho-Analysis and Groups*. London: Tavistock. esp. pp 100-101.

⁸ Williams, Bernard, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy*, Princeton University Press, 2002, 336pp.

⁹ See: Edmunds, L., & Dundes, A. (1995). *Oedipus: A folklore casebook*. Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press.

- Bion considered lying and evasion to be ubiquitous. He saw a risk of 'catastrophic change' when they are exposed. Perhaps today there is a need for A *Psychopathology of Everyday Judgement*.

It is often stated that the mental capacities of humans are better suited to seeking the truths about the physical world than those of human subjectivity and manufacture. I am not convinced of this. What seems to matter more is how the metaphysical realms of thought and those of discerning observation are brought together. This determines if we are able to arrive at descriptions that say more about what exists than any determined by the internal pressures and temptations of psychological and social expediency.

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