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# *Introduction*

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## *Theory of knowledge, metaphysics and other philosophical disciplines*

What is philosophy? This question can be easily asked but is rather difficult to answer. The word 'philosophy' has a very long history and in different periods it has referred to different things. Never as a matter of fact has the word 'philosophy' been given a meaning precise enough for it to be used unequivocally, a meaning on which most people living at a given time would agree.

The term 'philosophy' originated in ancient Greece. Etymologically we can distinguish two components in it: *fileo* = I love, I strive, and *sophia* = wisdom, knowledge. Originally, then, the term philosophy meant for the Greeks 'love of wisdom' or 'striving for knowledge'. According to its original meaning all scientific researchers were called philosophers. Thus originally the term 'philosophy' meant the same as the term 'science'. In the course of time when as the result of the growth of knowledge it came to be beyond the capacity of a single person to master the entire scope of knowledge, specialisation of the sciences started. From the once common core, the universal science called philosophy, various sciences began to detach themselves. They acquired separate names and were no longer confused under the teaching of philosophy. From the common core of the universal

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science, particular specialisations detached themselves which historically originated and developed later, natural science, mathematics, history, etc. Within the original core there remained inquiries which retained the name 'philosophy' and were either cultivated on a large scale at the dawn of European thought, that is before specialisation began, or which originated later but were connected with these initial inquiries.

Until recently the name 'philosophy' covered the following disciplines: metaphysics, theory of knowledge, logic, psychology, ethics, aesthetics. At the present time, as specialisation continues further, disciplines are detaching themselves from philosophy in the last sense mentioned. Contemporary psychology, feeling closer to biology or sociology than to the other philosophical disciplines, is attempting to break away from philosophy. Contemporary logic, which in some of its parts considers itself more closely related to mathematics than to its other philosophical companions, is also breaking away. Ethics, too, if we take it to be a science of morality, not a doctrine concerning a given morality, and also aesthetics, show centrifugal tendencies. The only disciplines which are faithful to the original conception of philosophy are metaphysics, the theory of knowledge, and normative ethics, attempting to teach what is good and what is evil. To the first two of these, the most fundamental philosophical disciplines, the chapters of this book are devoted. In the chapters that follow we shall become acquainted with the rich content of these disciplines.

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## *Part I*

# *The theory of knowledge*

# 1

## *Classical problems of the theory of knowledge*

The theory of knowledge, which is also called epistemology (from the Greek *episteme*, synonymous with the English word 'knowledge') or gnosology (from Greek *gnosis*, synonymous with the English word 'cognition') is – as the name shows – the science of cognition. But – what is cognition? By cognition we mean both cognitive acts and cognitive results. Cognitive acts are certain mental activities such as perception, remembering, judging, and, further, such as reasoning, reflecting, inferring and so on. Scientific assertions can serve as an example of cognitive results. Scientific assertions are not mental activities, so they are not to be included among cognitive acts. The law of gravity or the Pythagorean theorem are not mental phenomena of any kind but are the meaning of the statements in which these laws are formulated.

Does the theory of knowledge, which we said was the science of cognition, concern itself with cognitive acts or cognitive results? If we answer this question by examining what has actually taken place in the history of the theory of knowledge, we have to reply that both cognitive acts and cognitive results have been the subject of investigation.

If the theory of knowledge occupies itself with cognitive acts, that is with certain mental phenomena, it is then con-

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cerned with the same things as psychology in one of its parts. Psychology in fact deals with mental phenomena and consequently with cognitive acts. But although psychology and the theory of knowledge overlap to some extent, nevertheless each of these disciplines investigates the subject-matter from its own point of view. Psychology is concerned with the actual occurrence of cognitive processes. It attempts to describe and classify them and to find laws covering their occurrence. The theory of knowledge is concerned with something quite different.

Cognitive acts and results are the subjects of evaluation. They are evaluated from the point of view of their truth or falsity; we evaluate them also from the point of view of their justification. Now the actual occurrence of cognitive processes, which is the business of psychology, is of no interest to the theory of knowledge, which is interested, however, in the standards by which cognition is evaluated and thus in truth and falsity, justification or baselessness. What is truth? This is the first of the fundamental questions of the theory of knowledge, the problem of the essence of truth. The second classical problem of the theory of knowledge is the problem of the sources of cognition. In this problem we are concerned with what, in the last analysis, cognition should be based on and with the methods for arriving at it, if it is to be fully justified cognition of reality. The third classical problem of the theory of knowledge is the problem of the limits of cognition; it calls for an answer to the question what can be the subject of cognition and in particular, whether a reality which is independent of the subject of cognition can be cognised (known). We shall be satisfied for the time being with these general formulations of the three classical problems of the theory of knowledge and we shall go on to examine the solutions that have been given to them.

## 2

### *The problem of truth*

#### *The classical definition of truth and objections to it*

What is truth? The classical answer to this question states that the truth of a thought consists in its agreement with reality. *Veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus*: this was the classical answer in its scholastic formulation. But what is this agreement of thought and reality, as the basis of the definition of truth? Certainly not that the thought itself is identical with the reality it describes. Perhaps then in this, that this thought is a likeness of something real, is a reflection of a reality. But even this interpretation of the 'agreement of thought with reality' seems to some philosophers an absurd idea. How, they ask, could thought be a likeness of something quite different from it, how can thought which is something that has time-dimensions but no others, be a likeness of something that is spatial, how can thought resemble a cube or Niagara Falls? Furthermore, even regarding the time-duration itself, a thought in order to be true does not have to be like the reality it is concerned with. In order to be true a thought concerned with a short-lasting phenomenon does not have to be short-lasting. Thus a thought may fail to resemble reality and nevertheless be a true thought.

The defenders of the classical definition of truth reply to

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such criticisms by pointing out that the process which is the act of thought is one thing and its content another. They emphasise that it is not the process of thinking itself which ought to resemble reality but the content of the thought must resemble it if it is to be true. But even this does not satisfy the critics of the classical definition of truth. They point out that the concept of likeness is by no means a clear one. Likeness consists in a partial identity of characteristics; what part of their characteristics must be common to two objects for them to be called alike? This is by no means clearly determined. Consequently the definition describing as true those thoughts whose content resembles something real would be an imprecise definition, since it would not determine how far the likeness between the content of the thought and reality must extend for the thought to be true. Since this agreement of thought with reality does not amount to either identity or likeness between the two, the question is – say the critics of the classical definition of truth – what does this agreement finally consist in? Unable to find a satisfactory answer to this question, the opponents of the classical definition of truth come to the conclusion that this definition is devoid of genuine content.

But there is another line of thought which leads some thinkers to the rejection of the classical definition of truth. Some philosophers reject it and look for another definition because they think that it cannot be determined at all whether our thoughts agree with reality. If truth consists in agreement of thought with reality then we could not know of anything whether it was true or false. The conception of truth as agreement of thought with reality should, therefore, be given up as an unattainable ideal and should be replaced by another concept of truth which would enable us to determine whether our thoughts and assertions are true or not.

The opinion that we cannot ascertain the agreement of thought with reality is based on the arguments of ancient



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sceptics which could be summarised as follows: if someone wants to know whether a given thought or assertion agrees with reality then he would have to know for this purpose not only the thought itself but he would have to know reality as well. How can he do this? He will refer to experience, he will reason in this way or another, in short he will apply certain methods or criteria. But where is the certainty that cognition obtained by means of these criteria reveals undistorted reality to us? For this reason we should have to inspect our criteria. This inspection is carried out by applying the same or perhaps different criteria. In one way or another the validity of this inspection will depend on the validity of the criteria used in it and this again is doubtful and requires further investigation; in this investigation once again some criteria will be applied, and so on ad infinitum. In a word, we shall never be able to have justified knowledge of reality and because of this we shall never be able to know whether our thoughts agree with reality or not.

### *Truth as agreement with criteria*

The line of thought sketched above has led many philosophers to reject the definition of truth as agreement of thought with reality and to replace it with another definition of truth. This new definition of truth is arrived at in roughly the following way: let us consider the way in which we actually use the term 'truth'. In this way we shall perhaps be better able to become aware what this term really means for us. Undoubtedly everyone is ready to acknowledge as true an assertion in which he believes himself, which corresponds to his convictions. If one believes that *A* is *B* one is ready to assert a statement affirming that *A* is *B* is true, and conversely. If one attributes truth to an assertion, one is ready to believe what it asserts. However, no-one will contend that a true assertion is the same thing as an assertion one believes in.

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Everyone is aware that there are true assertions in which he does not believe if only because he does not know them. On the other hand, no-one considers himself infallible and everyone knows that there are assertions which he believes but are not true. We are fully aware that not all our convictions have been gained by means of scrupulous and systematic inquiries but that we arrived at them by applying methods, that is to say criteria, whose validity must be questioned and which must be replaced when confronted with more authoritative criteria. Only if we had arrived at our convictions by applying criteria which are final and irrevocable and from which there is no appeal would we unhesitatingly recognise all these convictions as true ones.

These and similar lines of argument suggest to some philosophers the following definition of truth: *a true assertion is the same thing as an assertion which satisfies final and irrevocable criteria*. There is no other way of becoming convinced about the truth of an assertion than by testing it with the final criterion whose verdict is irrevocable, in the sense that the verdict of any other criterion must give way to it. Whether an assertion which passes the test of this final criterion does or does not agree with reality we cannot know and – as the sceptics have shown – we shall never be able to know. Consequently when distinguishing truth from falsity the point is not whether a given assertion agrees with reality or not but whether it agrees with the final criteria. Thus in order to define the concept of truth according to our actual use of this notion we should define truth as *agreement of thought with final and irrevocable criteria*.

### *Nonclassical definitions of truth*

This conception of truth is given different forms by its different adherents in accordance with whatever is considered to be the final criterion.