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Polar Opposites

Pilate saith unto him, What is truth?

The Bible (*Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 1980, #44, 72)

This book is a study in contrast. Its main focus is the contrast between two radically opposed conceptions of truth as held and expounded by two prominent and influential philosophers. Consideration of this substantive contrast also involves consideration of two other contrasts: one of these can be described as ideological and has to do with philosophical canons and traditions; the other can be described as constitutive in that it has to do with what is thought to be the nature of philosophy.

The object of the contrastive exercise is to better understand how contemporary thought about truth can be as divided and sectarian as it is and still be about *truth*, about the same thing. My aim is to show that the two radically opposed conceptions of truth that I consider here, which arguably represent the two extremes of contemporary views, are tied together by the role that *realism* plays in both. My hope is to demonstrate that the indifference and dismissive attitudes so widely held by adherents of each tradition-bound conception of truth toward the other are misconceived and counterproductive. In particular, I will attempt to show that the most central basis for the split between the two camps, the issue of realism, has been seriously misconstrued. This comparative study, then, is intended to contribute to a *rapprochement* between the two camps. In this, I am pursuing efforts begun in *Starting with Foucault: An Introduction to Genealogy* and continued in *A House Divided: Comparing Analytic and Continental Philosophy* (Prado 1995, 2000, 2003a, 2003b).

The first difficulty I face is that the scope of the opposition between the contrasted conceptions of truth makes description of the contrast difficult because it seems that the conceptions are of truth in name only, given how much they differ. More particularly, it is difficult to describe the two conceptions while avoiding terminology that introduces the canonical and methodological baggage both carry.

The basic difference between the two conceptions is that in the first conception, the truth of sentences, and I shall speak of sentences rather than of propositions or statements, bears a relation to states of affairs, while in the second conception, truth is detached from states of affairs. This means that consideration of the opposed conceptions of truth immediately embroils us in the issue of realism, as well as raising well-known questions about just how true sentences relate to extralinguistic states of affairs. For want of better, in what follows I will refer to the first conception of truth, which many will immediately think of as the correspondence theory, as the *relational* conception, in order to avoid troublesome connotations. The second conception can best be described as the *discursive-currency* or, more briefly, the *currency* conception, for reasons that soon will emerge.

The baggage problem is immediately illustrated by the fact that, as just noted, as soon as I mention that the first conception relates true sentences to states of affairs, readers inevitably will think of the correspondence theory, with all its attendant difficulties. But the first conception of truth at issue here does not necessarily involve “correspondence,” at least not in the most familiar theoretical sense. As we will see below, correspondence can be given an innocuous, though not altogether trouble-free, sense. In any case, the essence of the first conception is that the truth of sentences consists “in a relation to reality, i.e., . . . truth is a relational property involving a characteristic relation (to be specified) to some portion of reality (to be specified)” (Marian 2002). What matters most in drawing the contrast between the relational and discursive-currency or currency conceptions is not some specific theoretical understanding of the relation of true sentences to reality, but that in the first case truth is dependent on extralinguistic states of affairs, while in the second case truth is wholly linguistic.

The description of the first conception of truth as relational is intended to capture not so much *how* sentences relate to reality, but rather how they are *assessed*. As John Searle puts it, sentences “are assessed as true when . . . the way they represent things as being is the way that things really are” (Searle 1995, 219). This need not imply anything about

correspondence in the theoretical sense. Crucial to the contrast I am exploring, however, is that whether sentences are true in saying how things are depends on them being “*made* true by how things are in the world” (Searle 1995, 219; my emphasis). Description of a conception of truth as “relational,” then, captures not only that truth depends on reality, it also captures that true sentences derive their truth from reality in the sense that how things are somehow determines their truth, regardless of how this determination is “to be specified.”

The discursive-currency, or currency, conception is the presently dominant form of relativism that makes truth wholly internal to discourse or language, thus separating truth from extralinguistic reality. The currency view reconceives truth as a property attributed to expressions sanctioned by contextual and historical linguistic-practice criteria. The currency conception is usually termed *constructivism* but, like *correspondence*, this term also has too many counterproductive connotations. One of those connotations is of the greatest importance here because it is part of what defines the contrast I am drawing. Whereas the relational conception is correctly seen as entailing realism, the discursive-currency conception is commonly but problematically seen as entailing irrealism in a way I describe later. *Linguistic idealism* is the term perhaps most often used to describe the metaphysical position assumed to be entailed by the currency conception of truth.

It is central to my project to deny that the currency conception of truth entails linguistic idealism or irrealism of some other sort. I do not deny that the currency conception is compatible with linguistic idealism, but most of what follows has to do with demonstrating that the relational and discursive-currency conceptions of truth, as held by the two philosophers I compare, are both realist in nature and commitment, contrary to commonly held views.

The two philosophers I compare as paradigm exponents of the relational and discursive-currency conceptions are John Searle and Michel Foucault, and they are as opposed in tradition, method, and style as they are on truth. Searle is perhaps the most committed and outspoken contemporary exponent of the conception of truth as accurate depiction of what is the case. Foucault is arguably the most significant and systematic exponent of the conception of truth as a socially constructed attribute of sanctioned discursive elements. For Searle, truth is sentences getting it right in the sense of saying precisely how things stand in extralinguistic reality. For Foucault, truth is wholly discursive and, as discursive, neither succeeds nor fails in depicting what is the case in extralinguistic reality.

As suggested above, what will emerge as the crux of the difference between Searle's relational conception and Foucault's discursive-currency conception of truth is the role each assigns or fails to assign to realism. Searle's relational view is grounded on and entailed by the most robust direct realism, while Foucault's discursive-currency looks to many as if it entails denial of extralinguistic reality. Establishing that Foucault is not an irrealist is central to showing that his and Searle's views on truth both merit serious consideration and are not incommensurable in defining paradigmatic realist and irrealist understandings of truth. Once it is seen that Foucault is as much a realist as Searle, their accounts of truth can be better understood in light of each other's strengths and weaknesses.

One complication with my contrastive/comparative project is that I need to do two things that are at odds with one another. The first is to offer enough exposition of Searle's and Foucault's positions to support my claims about their conceptions of truth and their views on realism, and this involves discussing material needed to situate their views on truth and realism, but that does not bear directly on truth and realism. The second thing is to not try the patience of readers familiar with one of my protagonists and the tradition he represents, but unfamiliar with and likely uninterested in or dismissive of the other protagonist and the tradition he represents. The tension between these two needs will prompt some to see my project as hopeless, but the acid test is whether the exposition I do offer supports my conclusions. I therefore ask readers to bear with me as I say what I need to say about both Searle and Foucault.

I also ask readers to keep in mind that my interest in Searle and Foucault is limited to comparing their views on truth and realism, always allowing for the need to consider other aspects of their work relevant to those views. My aim is *rapprochement*, not amalgamation or assimilation. It is not my intent to discern hidden philosophical agreement on truth or other matters between Searle and Foucault; even in showing them both to be realists, I will stress the difference in *how* each is a realist. Nor is it my intent to explore the contrasts I described as between canons and traditions, on the one hand, and between views of what constitutes philosophy on the other. I consider these contrasts only to the point that doing so is necessary to better situate Searle's and Foucault's views. Given that self-imposed limit, though I draw fairly heavily on the work of Donald Davidson and of Richard Rorty, I will not discuss other philosophers in Searle's and Foucault's respective philosophical camps, beyond drawing one or another helpful parallel and using the odd expedient quotation.

Three Contrasts

Drawing and considering the contrast between Searle's relational and Foucault's discursive-currency conceptions is complicated by more than the difficulties of characterizing and articulating the relational and currency conceptions of truth. As noted, the contrast cannot be considered without reference to two other intersecting contrasts between canons and traditions, and between conceptions of the nature of philosophy. The first of these, which I will call the *canonical* contrast, is between supposedly incommensurable philosophical traditions, the so-called analytic and Continental traditions. My choice of Searle and Foucault as protagonists is partly determined by the fact that they are not only model exponents of the relational and discursive-currency conceptions of truth, but also model representatives of the analytic and Continental traditions.

The second intersecting contrast, which I will call the *priority* contrast, is one between divergent conceptions of philosophy that run deeper than the canonical-tradition distinction, which is based on textual and methodological differences. The priority contrast is between conception of philosophy as ahistorical and of it as historical. Specifically, the priority contrast is between conception of epistemology as either prior to or as consequent on broadly scientific developments. Here again, my choice of Searle and Foucault is due to their being model representatives of the ahistoricist and historicist positions.

The canonical and priority contrasts intersect because the priority contrast cuts across the canonical one; both analytic and Continental philosophers can be, and are, either ahistoricists or historicists, though it appears that somewhat more ahistoricists fall into the analytic rather than the Continental camp. Searle's views on truth, language, and consciousness put him in the ahistoricist subset of analytic philosophers. This is of importance for my project primarily in that, as a consequence, fewer Continental philosophers, who largely are historicists, read Searle than otherwise might. Foucault, a poststructuralist and postmodern, is firmly in the historicist subset of Continental philosophers, so fewer analytic philosophers, who largely are ahistoricists, read Foucault than otherwise might. Counterproductive, ideologically based neglect of each of my protagonists by philosophers on the other side of the canonical divide is what first prompted this project.

The canonical is the most general and familiar of the three contrasts and is largely a function of academic bias or ignorance; and while it is

the one most often discussed, it is currently being eroded by various cooperative initiatives (Prado 2003a). The less familiar but more significant contrast is the priority one between conceptions of philosophy as autonomous and timeless, as application of rationality unaffected by history or science, and of philosophy as shaped by historical and scientific developments, changing values, and varying objectives. On the ahistoricist understanding, philosophy is the “queen of the sciences,” broadly understood, and the arbiter of reason. This is the conception that Rorty has spent most of his career attempting to debunk, one that Searle staunchly defends, and one for which Foucault has no time at all. On the historicist understanding, philosophy is, as Rorty puts it, one more voice in the conversation of humankind (Rorty 1979a, 264). Moreover, it is not only politics that makes for strange bedfellows. With respect to the canonical and priority contrasts, our two protagonists are aligned with some likely and some not-so-likely predecessors and contemporaries. Searle is aligned with Gottlob Frege, Rudolf Carnap, and Saul Kripke, as one might expect, but also with Edmund Husserl, and Jürgen Habermas. Foucault is aligned with Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and Hans-Georg Gadamer, again as one would expect, but also with the later Wittgenstein, and Donald Davidson.

The contrast that most concerns me is the one between radically opposed conceptions of truth as a property of sentences that accurately depict how things are and of truth as a property of sentences that are current in a given discourse. Instantiation of these conceptions in the work of Searle and Foucault is enhanced by how Searle’s is perhaps the most aggressively pursued exposition and defense of truth as relational, and by Foucault’s being arguably the most cogent instance of postmodern relativization of truth to discourse. Unfortunately, the stimulating opposition between the two is distorted by the attitudes supporting and surrounding the canonical divide, especially as drawn between analytic and postmodern thought. Though the canonical split is not as fundamental as the priority split between philosophy conceived as ahistorical and as historical, it is nonetheless a division that has had tremendous influence. Stanley Cavell claims that the “[a]ntagonism and mutual misrepresentation between so-called analytical and Continental philosophy have helped shape . . . every significant development in Western intellectual life since the 1960s – structuralism, poststructuralism, postmodernism, gender studies, etc.” (Critchley 2001, back cover).

The main negative influence the canonical divide has on Searle’s and Foucault’s views on truth is that antagonism and mutual

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misrepresentation ensure that most of Searle's and Foucault's respective peers simply do not consider that both are doing philosophy. Searle's peers dismiss Foucault's work as tendentious ideological history, and think his discursive-currency account of truth a modish relativism that is manifestly untenable because it entails irrationalism and, likely, irrationalism. Foucault's peers dismiss Searle's work as so many tiresome and unproductive technicalities, and consider his defense of a relational account of truth as tedious rehearsal of a bankrupt representationalist doctrine. A particular exchange in a debate between Searle and Rorty, who often serves as a North American surrogate postmodern, captures this unproductive partisanship. Referring to analytic philosophers' reaction to postmodernism, Searle remarks, "most of this stuff just passes them by. They wonder, why should I waste my time attacking it?" Rorty responds that while it is true that analytic philosophers scorn postmodernism, "analytic philosophy is not taken very seriously anywhere except by analytic philosophers" (Rorty and Searle 1999, 58).

The unhappy result of this mutual disdain is that consideration of the issue of truth fails to incorporate the different insights to be found in the work of philosophers on opposite sides of the canonical and priority divides and, in particular, of Searle and Foucault. This is most unfortunate because Searle's views contain important ideas about what Bernard Williams describes as the commitment to truthfulness, and Foucault's views contain important ideas about what Williams describes as our suspicion regarding truth. Again, Searle's lapses illustrate that the commitment to truthfulness needs a wider and more flexible understanding of truth than is offered by relational views, while Foucault's excesses illustrate that suspicion about truth has been overdone. To proceed, then, we need to focus on the central question.

Pilate's Question

What is truth? Pilate's question was not intended as a genuine question. How it was intended is better reflected in Francis Bacon's rendition of the biblical passage quoted above: "What is truth? said jesting Pilate; and would not stay for an answer" (*Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* 1980, #28, 27). Bacon better captures the mocking nature of Pilate's question, but his rendition still falls short of how the question most likely was intended, and that is as rhetorical in the sense of expressing powerlessness to resolve an intractable impasse over competing accounts or descriptions. As such, the question does not call for an answer, but neither is it as dismissive as

usually thought. The point is that Pilate's question was more a recognition of powerlessness than anything else, and this should not surprise us. Until quite recently, it was only in philosophy seminars and writings that Pilate's question called for an answer. But that has changed. Pilate's question recently acquired urgency as a genuine question, and did so well beyond the borders of academic philosophy. Thomas Nagel remarks that the question of truth now "runs through practically every area of inquiry" and has "invaded the general culture" (Nagel 1997, 3).

The source of the new urgency is the historically recent but widespread support of more and less sophisticated versions of relativism in areas running from the humanities and social sciences through politics and the law to the media and individuals' arguments about abortion, terrorism, or a president's morality. What led to the espousal of relativism is that, over the past several decades, relativism took hold in the humanities and social science disciplines. It affected how research was conducted in those disciplines and, more significantly, how their respective subject matters were taught to the people who themselves now dominate not only the humanities and social sciences but also politics and the media (cf. Rorty and Searle 1999).

Relativism's sway outside philosophy has resulted in an odd development within philosophy that has contributed to Pilate's question becoming urgent. Too many philosophers, whose responsibility it is to sort out the issue of truth, have responded to the spread of relativism with dismissive invective rather than engaged analysis and rebuttal. At the heart of this reaction is a misguided construal of relativism as not a serious philosophical position because it is supposedly self-defeating – a judgment facetiously glossed by saying that relativism inconsistently claims it is objectively true that everything is relative.

This dubious response to relativism appears legitimate to its exponents because they erroneously believe that all forms of relativism are what Michael Krausz calls "extreme relativism" or the view that "all claims involving truth . . . are on a par" (Krausz 1989, 1). Construing relativism as holding that "every belief . . . is as good as every other" is a mistake if only because, as Rorty remarks, "[n]o one holds this view . . . [e]xcept for the occasional cooperative freshman" (Rorty 1982, 166). I think Rorty is right; however, that does not change the fact that philosophers' misconstrual of relativism has meant that nonphilosophers, especially students, end up being exposed to relativism on every side, while being offered only facile and unpersuasive treatment of relativism by those most able to explain and critique it.

The dismissive reaction to relativism is prompted by the idea that relativism is not just about truth; it also reconceives the standards for intellectual inquiry as contextual and historical. The importance of this is that, as we will see with Foucault, rationality itself is historicized along with truth, and this is something that many philosophers cannot accept. Hilary Putnam offers a typical repudiation of historization of rationality, saying that chronologically varying historical standards “cannot define what reason is” because they inescapably “presuppose reason . . . for their interpretation” (Putnam 1987, 227). For Putnam and many others, reason is prior to and independent of its applications; rationality is “a regulative idea” that governs all inquiry and is independent of the activities and institutions it governs. Rationality enables us “to criticize the conduct of all activities and institutions” because it is ahistorical, universal, and wholly independent of our practices (Putnam 1987, 228).

Some see Putnam’s response as question-begging because it presupposes what is at issue: the ahistorical nature of rationality as regulative. Others see philosophers holding truth and rationality to be ahistorical as simply defending a self-attributed status as adjudicators of reason. For their part, Putnam and like-minded others are simply at a loss to understand how intellectual inquiry could be conducted on the assumption that rational standards and methods are historical and contextual. This impasse is characteristic of the divisions marked by the priority contrast.

The problem with a too-ready dismissal of relativism is that truth simply is not as straightforward as ahistoricist objectivists think. The idea that truth is a depiction of how things are has proven difficult to unpack and generates conundrums about verification and the relation between true sentences and what they describe. There are also problems about just what it is that is true: sentences or propositions. Basically, the trouble is that truth is a property of beliefs and sentences (or propositions), and beliefs and sentences are intentional, and hence are about their intentional objects. But we seem never to have been able to say, clearly and unproblematically, just what sort of relation there is between those intentional objects, considered as true, and the nonintentional states of affairs most are about. The major stumbling block is that extralinguistic reality does not come packaged in convenient “facts” or naturally delineated states of affairs to which we can relate particular beliefs and sentences. We have not been able to establish an acceptable account of how what is deemed “a fact” is a *relatum* to a true belief or sentence. Referring to this inability, Williams notes that “[t]here is no account of facts that at once is general enough for the purpose and does more than trivially reiterate

the content of the sentences for which it is supposed to be illuminating the truth conditions” (Williams 2002, 65).

Both objectivists and relativists have valid points to make in their ongoing debate, but while philosophical debate about truth has been going on since at least Plato and Protagoras, and we seem no closer to a satisfactory account of it, things actually have changed. What has changed is that concern with truth is no longer only of philosophical interest. There is now a new and profound ambivalence regarding truth’s possibility, and it goes well beyond philosophy. Williams captures this ambivalence in his contention that two opposed ideas are “very prominent in modern thought and culture.” The first of these ideas, though ancient, gained special force in the late seventeenth century and is “an intense commitment to truthfulness,” what Williams also describes as “a readiness against being fooled, an eagerness to see through appearances to the real structures and motives that lie behind them.” The second idea, though its roots are in early Greek skepticism, has only recently acquired significant predominance; it is “an equally pervasive suspicion about truth itself,” namely, the nagging question of “whether [truth] can be more than relative or subjective” (Williams 2002, 1).

The first idea, the commitment to truthfulness, is what Nietzsche called “the will to truth.” This is an impetus to discover precisely what is the case, but it entails two realist assumptions: an ontological assumption that things must be just one way, and an epistemological assumption that the way things are is accessible and, just as important, statable. Despite this impetus, we are haunted by the realization that discovering and/or saying how things are is always problematic because it is always revisable and so, perhaps, ultimately unachievable. This second idea has many incarnations, all denying the ontological and epistemological assumptions entailed by the will to truth. Some versions of this second idea focus on epistemology, and hold that we lack access to how things are or lack the capacity to accurately determine and say how things are; others focus on ontology, and hold to some degree that things are not objectively any way at all or just are as we believe and say they are.

The root of suspicion about truth’s objectivity, accessibility, and statability basically is recognition that awareness is always aspectual, a function of perspective. We are always aware of the world, and ourselves, from some point of view. Physical position, inescapable interpretive elements, values, preconceptions, presuppositions, assumptions, expectations, interests, objectives, fears, and even moods condition our awareness. The moment this point is acknowledged, its corollary becomes relentless: perspectives