

ASPECTS OF TRUTH

What is ‘truth’? The question that Pilate put to Jesus was laced with dramatic irony. But at a time when what is true and what is untrue have acquired a new currency, the question remains of crucial significance. Is truth a matter of the representation of things which lack truth in themselves? Or of mere coherence? Or is truth a convenient if redundant way of indicating how one’s language refers to things outside oneself?

In her ambitious new book, Catherine Pickstock addresses these profound questions, arguing that epistemological approaches to truth either fail argumentatively or else offer only vacuity. She advances instead a bold metaphysical and realist appraisal which overcomes the Kantian impasse of ‘subjective knowing’ and ban on reaching beyond supposedly finite limits. Her book contends that in the end truth cannot be separated from the transcendent reality of the thinking soul.

Catherine Pickstock is Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge and a Fellow of Emmanuel College, Cambridge. Her books include *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (1997), *Thomas d’Aquin et la Quête Eucharistique* (2001) and *Repetition and Identity* (2014). In addition, she was co-editor – with John Milbank and Graham Ward – of the influential collection *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (1998).

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A New Religious Metaphysics



CATHERINE PICKSTOCK

University of Cambridge



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For Janet Louise Crozier 1937–2018

Pedicle

This reverberation
Perplex light
Thrall find
Lands glass-wise
On a vertical.
Did you rush whispering,
Just now?
Blown-through
Fast and thorough.
You are not a pedicle I see,
But she who catches me
In-twirls spiraling
And then betimes
Recedes, reclusive-wise,
A smallness
Answering the
Land's width
In your exacting billow
Without holding on

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PREFACE

In this book, I undertake a philosophical and theological exploration of the topic of truth. Such an approach is in some ways unprecedented, at least to the degree that it makes no attempt to separate between these discourses, nor to build one upon the other. In a manner that some readers may find disconcerting, it interweaves metaphysical discussions with others relating to the history of Christian revelation and revelatory practice.

No pre-existing Ariadne's thread of method is followed here: rather, a way through the labyrinth of the question of truth emerges with the arrival at the goal. No wound spool precedes its unravelling, since, as for St Augustine, the goal and the way turn out to be one and the same, as the final unstated 'aspect' of my thesis about truth itself.

What is my rationale for this entanglement and lack of singular 'procedure'? Why is the means to the goal also a circling around it, with no transparent sequence, but as a series of aspectual approaches?

The reason pertains to my twofold contention; first, that truth is to be regarded as metaphysical, rather than epistemological, and secondly, that a theological perspective on truth calls attention to truth as proportion between things and mind.

In relation to the first contention, that truth is regarded as metaphysical, following Kant, philosophy has been dominated by an approach which begins with subjective knowing, and then struggles outwards to reach objective reality, often within the confined scope of a concomitant ban upon reaching beyond supposed finite limits. Such an approach can never be certain that its apparent knowledge has arrived at truth, nor that truths to which it does lay claim are more than temporary circumstances.

However, ironically, such is the sceptical anxiety to which this cognitive circumstance gives rise, that truth, whether of reality or of logic, tends within

this oscillation to be seen as objective, indifferent to knowing awareness, something which should ideally be escaped from, or rendered free from the taint of subjectivity. In this case, a further doubt arises concerning the possible superfluity of being beyond mere existence, the way in which things happen to be.

Within the compass of this modern ‘critical’ confinement, or the confinement of an ‘ontology’ supposedly free from initial theological assumptions, a ‘natural theology’ has struggled to find plausible arguments which would be able to exit an already-presumed finite self-sufficiency, in order to argue for an ultimate realm of ‘truth’, or of eternal stability.

Meanwhile, a theology that reflects upon revelation may tend to consider the arrival of truths as extrinsic to a finite realm, and a finite understanding to which they will appear alien.

I argue below that the epistemological approach to truth cannot yield truth, and that it has come critically unstuck. Throughout the following chapters, I trace and advert to the dissolution of ‘givenness’ in the case of both Analytic and Continental philosophy. If nothing is ineluctably present to the knower, as an empirical or a rational foundation, one’s remaining options would seem to be (1) various modes of scepticism, whether hypostasised as metaphysics or not; or (2) a turning to metaphysical and theological ideas that reality is not so much given, as it is a symbolic gift, which must be actively deciphered and handed on if it is to remain ‘truly’ a gift.

Equally, I advert to the contention that post-Kantian philosophy is unable to escape, or to resolve the ‘correlation problem’, or the circumstance that one seems to be obliged to assume without warrant that understanding and reality are somehow ‘fitted’ to one another. In this instance, a sceptical response seems insufficient: rather, it seems to be beholden upon one to produce a speculative account of why correlation holds good, or how, rather, it can be escaped.

In the third place, neither knowledge nor logic has come to seem a secure redoubt, because of the various paradoxes by which it is afflicted, and which have long been known about, but which have been merely willed away. The consequent hollowing out of thought seems to point to a hollowing out of things, unless one ventures that perhaps it is not, after all, abstract reason and logic that hold the key to the real, but rather well-attuned feeling, expressive imagination and creativity.

For this threefold reason, we live in an era in which pre-modern metaphysical approaches to truth are returning to view, and to a renewed viability. For such approaches, truth coincides with being as a ‘transcendental’, and yet it is surplus to being, insofar as being itself is taken to be manifestatory and expressive. Such expression comes to fruition within spiritual intelligence,

which will perforce be ‘in the truth’, unless something occludes it or intervenes.

The metaphysical approach offers assumptions which are largely overlooked within modern philosophy: truth is taken to reside in things and in the mind, and also in the proportion and affinity between them. In consequence, realism ceases to be marked by the notion of what is true in the absence of mind, while, at the same time, not being idealistically reduced to the mental sphere. Rather, it pertains to a continuity of *eidōs*, or form between material realities and mental realities. One can understand this at once in the Aristotelian terms of *species*, and in more modern terms, such as of the ambivalent material/spiritual character of the mediating human body, the human senses and specifically human, ritual activities.

Whereas post-Kantian critical thought commences with knowledge, then struggles to reach truth, and yet must assume truth to be *indifferent* to knowledge, pre-Kantian, High Medieval and Renaissance Neoplatonic realism begins with Being and is able to countenance that truth lies both in things and within intelligence, though more eminently within the latter.

One of the unusual features of this book is its *defence of psychologism*, or the view that the reality of truth cannot be separated from the reality of the thinking soul. This is not necessarily a reductive, naturalistic and empiricist view, *à la* J. S. Mill; indeed, it was a position held in effect by Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Proclus and Aquinas. For these thinkers, truth is most proper to soul and to intelligence, as metaphysical regions more eminently real than the material region. Insofar as there is any truth beyond intelligence, or beyond discursive intelligence, it lies in an ineffable reality, as much ‘beyond being’, or beyond existence in any ordinary sense as it is beyond intellect.

Without truth in things as an expression of things, or truth in the mind as the fulfilment of truth, it seems that there can be no truth. This might be the shortest summary of this book’s account of truth in its finite instance.

I also argue, however, by considering certain aspects of truth, that were truth an aleatory and random expression of the real, then there would be no truth. If the addition of truths to things does not ‘correspond’ to them – an approach to truth which I refuse – then for these additions not to be reduced to the arbitrary, it must be understood that both the things of this world and thoughts about this world, in their shared eventual and continued creative process, are perforce participations in the eternal. Any notions of truth which seek to bracket our relations to the eternal seem to construct a *mille feuille* of contortions in order to overcome the ineluctable contradictions which ensue. My thesis is unabashedly Platonic.

Sadly, a great deal of theology has forlornly sought to operate in the methodologically atheist space of modern philosophy. It has often begun with an attempt to ground belief in a surety of understanding, and yet has assumed that the guarantee of the purity of objects of belief is their objective indifference to subjective inflection and shared affinity with the believer. For a dead world, assumed to be merely ‘there’, such an approach has impossibly attempted to ascend to the heavens, forgetting that Jacob’s ladder must first be let down to us.

One can think of this ladder in terms of ‘philosophical’ participation, and of ‘theological’ revelation. A theological account of truth may begin by reading reality as gift, and not as given, and as a sharing in God, which means that it reveals more than itself; as a gift that is ‘created’, it is already a further gift which is ‘grace’: this calls one back to the source of the giver.

Here lies the second aspect of my contention, mentioned above, namely, that a religious, and in this case a Christian perspective on truth calls increased attention to truth as proportion between things and mind, and to their shared participation in the eternal, and also to the process and event of the emergence of this proportion, non-identically repeated through the course of time. For the present book, this perspective is not only theologically but philosophically essential. This is because no ontological categorisation of reality may be certain of being exhaustive, nor able to override the way in which one normally construes unique disclosive instances (‘that *one* lost day by the sea’, etc.) to exceed the disclosive power of the merely general.

Nevertheless, over this disclosive process which privileges instances in excess of abstract universals, human doubt and disfiguration hover: a circumstance which theology reads as one’s ‘fallenness’. For Christian tradition, there exists a final salve in this respect: the coincidence of the temporal becoming of truth, with the enigmatic manifestation in time of the eternal truth in the event of the Incarnation, and its conjoined eucharistic repetition.

It is for this reason that I suggest that an exploration of Christian liturgy sustains, and even consummates, a philosophical exploration of the topic of truth.

The present book argues that truth is not just a matter of the ‘exchanging’ of a gift, nor of truth’s ‘realising’ in both things and the mind. Beyond these alternatives, though including them, this book contends that truth may be seen as a ‘conforming’ between the two, and a conforming of both as a temporal, ritual process to an eternity which is itself as Trinity, not just being, but also manifestation and the interpreted conjoining of the two. One may see this as a vertical correlation or cascading conformation.

In Chapter 1, ‘Receiving’, I enunciate the contrast between epistemological and ontological or metaphysical approaches to truth. The dominance of the former in twentieth-century philosophy is rehearsed, in both its Analytic and its Continental variants. I consider the way in which, during this period, the Kantian anchoring of truth in subjective knowing took the form of a shift to a more ‘neutral’ logical space, variously configured. The focus upon this space, whether it is understood in terms of linguistic or phenomenological structures, allowed a kind of semi-realism to obtain. However, I look at the way in which the ‘foundationalisms’ of these structures, whether in the domain of facts or conceptual suppositions, have since been deconstructed, while basic logical assumptions have been shown to conceal lurking paradoxes. The further problem of an inexplicable assumed ‘correlation’ between mind and reality is also introduced; we will keep coming back to this throughout the book. At the end of the chapter, a first sketch of an alternative, pre-Kantian, metaphysical approach to truth is offered. For this approach, truth resides in things as well as in minds, although, in contrast to dominant twentieth-century ‘anti-psychologism’, it is lodged in the highest things of all, minds or spirits.

In Chapter 2, ‘Exchanging’, I attempt to enrich the discussion of the turn against foundationalist approaches to truth, in terms of a contrast between a rejected inert ‘givenness’ of either reality or logic and a pre-modern provision for thinking of reality and cognitive reflection in terms of ‘gift’. I consider whether the notion of gift, as combining ‘thing’ with ‘sign’, might resist epistemological dualisms. The pre-modern, metaphysical gift, I suggest, is linked with notions of exchanging and participation, whereas the ‘pure’, unilateral gift, beloved of phenomenologists subscribing to ‘the theological turn’, remains within the confines of epistemology. By the same token, there can be no ‘pure’ phenomenology prior to the ‘exchange’ of meaningful response involved in hermeneutics. But this priority of the interpretative can only be saved from scepticism with respect to truth by connecting it, along with the phenomenological moment, with metaphysical speculation.

In Chapter 3, ‘Mattering’, I begin to venture into the terrain of speculation, through a reading of Rowan Williams’s *The Edge of Words*. If truth cannot be any kind of epistemological ‘correspondence’, coherence or correlation, as already argued, then, following Williams, one’s poetic ‘additions’ to reality must be appropriately expressive of that reality, if there is to be any parrying with truth. Since such truth cannot be measured, it can only be intimated as a continuous participation of both donated reality and that which is added to it in exchange in eternal Being. Yet this traditional metaphysical framing of ‘poetic truth’ seems to yield a less traditional and

more open-ended metaphysics, according to which, each new poetic addition constitutes a kind of monadic intimation or diorama of the metaphysical whole. This realisation goes hand in hand with a questioning of the individual subject/universal predicate structure of inherited grammar, in favour of a more ‘ideographic’ fanning structure of language, intimated by Williams after Margaret Masterman.

In Chapter 4, ‘Sensing’, the notion that speculative metaphysics must be as much performed as theorised is extended beyond language and poetics into a consideration of liturgy, especially with regard to its links with integrated, ‘synaesthetic’ bodily sensation and spiritual formation. Truth is to be regarded as a matter of all-encompassing witness and realisation, in accordance with a specifically Christian patristic and medieval realisation of the inherently ‘sensing’ character of thought itself.

In Chapter 5, ‘Minding’, I consider the implications of the previous chapter for the presence of truth in the mind. Synaesthesia implies not just the mingling of the different senses to engender meaning, but the reflexivity of the senses themselves, upon which the possibility of mental consciousness rests. For pre-modern frameworks, material influences were not conceived in terms of either efficient cause or spontaneous pre-reflexive irruption, both extrinsic to thought. I consider the way in which even modern thinkers, trying to escape the myth of the given and the epistemological frame, remain impeded until they countenance meaningful form ‘out there’ in things, as well as ‘in here’ in one’s mind. Without this embrace of non-reductive naturalism, such thinkers are unable to appreciate the body as a mediating sphere between the material and the spiritual, despite their attempt to do so.

In Chapter 6, ‘Realising’, this critique is taken a little further. Many recent thinkers claim to break with the quasi-realism of the previous century, and to embrace realism. But on examination, such quasi-realism, which ultimately traces a lineage to Kant, has not necessarily been altogether undone. Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor contrast knowledge as ‘contact’ with knowledge as ‘mediation’. They refuse the pre-modern mode of contact as continuity of form (*eidōs* or *morphē*) between material things and spiritual mind, and seek to substitute contact as haptic knowledge through the body. However, I suggest that without the mediation of form, this mode of haptic knowledge is as prone to optical reserve as a ‘visual’ model of understanding. Nonetheless, if mediating form is embraced, it can be brought together with a contemporary sense of the body’s crossing of the subjective/objective divide. Such coming-together was anticipated in pre-modern liturgy, as already described, and was affirmed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty who proffered a metaphysical realism

beyond Dreyfus and Taylor. The chapter considers the new ‘plain realists’, such as Jocelyn Benoist, Maurizio Ferraris and Ray Brassier, who reinstate ‘the given’ in a more all-encompassing way. I question whether their suppositions of spontaneous sensory contact with reality prior to thought are plausible.

In Chapter 7, ‘Thinging’, I turn my attention to a family of contemporary thinkers who may be referred to as ‘fancy realists’, because in seeing that realism requires metaphysics, they embrace speculative modes of thought. I argue that many ‘speculative realists’ and ‘speculative materialists’ are still offering dogmatised accounts of epistemological modes of thought. Their speculations often remain within the compass of Kantian assumptions and, for this reason, retain parity with German Idealism. The thinker who, by contrast, begins directly with objects and not subjects is Tristan Garcia. However, I argue that his assumed carapace of immanentism tangles him up in arbitrary hierarchical dualities, especially as between whole and parts, and process and substance. In seeking to outstep these poles, this position proffers awkward theories of atheistic occasionalism, involving drastically unmediated things, or alternatively, an ultimate hiddenness mediated by an ultimate nullity. In any case, truth is domesticated within these philosophies to the sphere of finite ‘truth effects’, since at the ultimate and nihilistic ontological level, there exists no truth at all. Truth that concerns ‘what is the case’ perforce reduces to being, and so to redundancy, a theme that occurs sporadically throughout the book. In another respect, however, Tristan Garcia and other speculative realists instructively reveal the empty and aporetic character of causality, motion, time, space, relation and the thing itself.

In Chapter 8, ‘Emptying’, these ontological aporias are further explored. It has been suggested that the radicalism of speculative materialists at times involves a surprisingly conservative commitment to the Principle of Non-Contradiction. Following Graham Priest, I argue in this chapter that the dialethic (or true-contradictory) violation of this law with respect to recursion and infinity is called for by logical consistency itself. However, I suggest that the resulting nihilistic hypostasisation of emptiness may arbitrarily construe the dialethic as a dogmatic gesture at the margins of the Principle of Non-Contradiction, rather than, as for Nicholas of Cusa, an apophatic gesture which may indicate an unknown plenitude rather than an enthralling absence. The question of the connection between a general and elusive emptiness of all things, and a hyper-elusiveness of subjectivity, is ventured. I ask in what sense the subjective might truthfully disclose this general ontological circumstance.

In Chapter 9, ‘Spiriting’, I explore the possibility that the mark of genuine realism is not whether things remain ‘true’ in the absence of a subjective knower, but rather, whether a metaphysical continuity between all existences and the knowledge possessed by spirits pertains. I argue that the Western philosophical lineage, since Socrates, has called forth a metaphysical turn to the subject which is to be differentiated from the later epistemological turn to the subject, espoused by Kant, and I draw a connection between this claim and the question of dialetheism explored in the previous chapter. Plato’s *Parmenides* offers us a theory of participation which involves a violation of the Principle of Non-Contradiction. At the same time, a contrast is drawn between Plato’s thought and that of the Eastern Nagarjuna, insofar as Plato makes provision for the paralogical to be lived out in the life of the soul, the city and one’s relationship with the cosmos. I connect this Platonic provision with Bergson’s claim that one can feel, intuit orprehend fundamental temporal ontological fusions which escape rational arraignment. The site of the realisation of truth in subjects may be located here.

In Chapter 10, ‘Conforming’, the claim that the possibility of truth involves elusive ontological bonds between known things and the knowing subject is explored through a reading of three seventeenth-century English Platonists: Edward Herbert, Robert Greville and Anne Conway. Herbert’s thesis that truth is ‘conformation’ is contrasted with ideas of truth as ‘correlation’. The former offers a mysterious continuity of form and meaning, while the latter a baffling convergence of incommensurables. I argue that for truth to be possible, three things must pertain: conformation between material things and mind; a conformation of this process itself with eternity through participation; and an eternal expression of being as ‘truth’. The way in which the latter notion points towards the Trinity in Conway is highly instructive for our purposes, especially when seen in the light of her Christological consideration of truth. Because metaphysics, as for Rowan Williams, is a matter of poetic addition or dilation as well as speculation, participation involves horizontal arriving and contingent event, as well as a vertically descending universal order. These come together in Christ, the final event and expression of truth. For Conway, this event resolves the question of how reality embraces both infinite and finite, and how they might be mediated. As I argue, truth, like goodness, is a matter of degrees, and falsity is a matter of privation. But insofar as there may be positive, though lesser degrees of truth, one looks to a Christological and Eucharistic vision which embraces the

reality of eternal truth and all the lesser instantiations of truth which participate in this eternity and tend towards it.

The Postscript returns to Socrates and confirms the notion that truth, as for the Platonic Kierkegaard, is subjectivity. The extremity or optimum pitch of subjective life is *witness* to truth, which is a witness unto death. The road to truth is the Stations of the Cross.

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