

Special Issue Truth and Falsity: Introduction

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Once again, the need to think "what is truth?" imposes itself stridently today. When "alternative facts" and "fake news" flood our lexicon and become naturalized as everyday expressions, it is because the criteria of truth to which we were accustomed have abandoned our discursive regime and, consequently, our relationship with the world has become even more uncertain, opaque, and inoperative.

We experience a disturbing sense of loss of our right to truth. The non-existence of criteria – or, shall we say, their definitive disappearance – that once allowed us to distinguish between "truth" and "falsehood", "falsehood" and "lie", "fact" and "opinion", "news" and "fake news", etc., is at the root of a restlessness that spreads from media to politics, invading the social sphere, penetrating our private lives, and threatening science itself.

Resistance to the confusion caused by this post-truth era, to which entire nations have been subjected, and with which we are made to believe that we are hopelessly entangled – that we are already what it turns us into – leads us into an insistent search for answers, solutions, or, at least, ways of solving the problem, of rethinking possible clarifications, of finding clues for establishing tangible

differences between truth and falsehood. The ineffectiveness of these answers is manifest in the so-called polarizations that are rising every day, in increasingly radical ways. After all, it does not seem so simple to distinguish facts from news, from narratives, from interpretation, from speculation, from manipulation, etc..

Within this context, the need for philosophy arises, not only for a critical thinking without which we no longer know what is at stake in the most fundamental choices we make, but also for more elaborate concepts, for more illuminating articulations of the problem, for more solid distinctions. Accordingly, we have synthesized several of these intricacies in our call:

Can we grant ignorance a cognitive virtue as we do for knowing truth? How can we deal with truth and falsehood in relation to epistemic agents, with their limited rationality? Why are we sometimes led to believe falsehoods? Is believing falsehoods always pernicious? Could we have reasons to believe falsehoods? Can we find a cognitive virtue in preserving ignorance rather than in overcoming it? How can truth be a criterion for an ethical way of life? Is there a link between truth and courage? And between truth and freedom? What about the use of truth and falsehood as strategic devices for obtaining diverse kinds of advantages? What about the mimicking of truth, given the powerful forms of deception offered today by technological advances? How does a post-truth regime imply challenging an epistemic authority having "control" and power over truth?

However, while the call had already been launched, something very serious happened that greatly intensified the urgency of the theme presented here; something that sharpened the need for a more elaborate philosophical debate, in areas ranging from philosophy of science to political philosophy, from metaphysics to the theory of language. In effect, with the emergence of a global health crisis, many other questions, already implicit in our call, can now be asked explicitly:

Who holds the "truth of the facts" during this global health crisis? What kind of methods and discourses are appropriate to make sense of such a situation? During a pandemic, who has the right to decide how people will manage their lives? Should the empirical sciences have absolute primacy in all of these issues? Or do the sciences, in order to operate, already presuppose answers given, consciously or not, by other areas of knowledge (e.g. philosophy, sociology, politics, economics, technology)? To what extent is the concept of truth relevant to the "science of the pandemic"?

Moreover, these concerns point to another more fundamental question: how can philosophy (and what kind of philosophy) come to assist the problem we face, by namely distinguishing the true from the false?

We acknowledge that turning to philosophy implies accessing its theses, because it is often confused with its own history whenever it limits itself to autopsying the collection of theories that form its patrimony and forgets its activity as a producer of new intelligibilities, of immanent forms of life that express the singularity, the difference of each, and of the philosopher's own life. However, unlike religion, philosophy is not pastoral, it does not propose a catechism, a dogmatic formula for the good life. Nor does philosophy have the task of empirical experimentation, the production of factualities that inscribe themselves in new discursive regions. This is the role of science.

As a Greek creation, philosophy is the daughter of democracy. It is in the city, through the friendship among free human beings who are equal in rights, that the figure of the philosopher is drawn as one who, unlike the wise old man, seeks knowledge without ever formally possessing it. Unlike the wise man, the philosopher is the friend of wisdom. It was this very figure of friendship, found in the etymology of the word philosophy, that took the form of rivalry among friends, making *agon*, generalized athleticism, the image for the exercise of philosophy.

Thus, to consider philosophy as an exercise of rationality that aims at producing consensus is not only belittling, but also forgetful that, if philosophy is dedicated to any cult, then it is to the veneration of difference in an activity that involves producing it, and it is only this difference that it guarantees.

We have plenty of examples, especially in today's world of mass communication, of disrespect for difference, of micro-fascist experiences of domination of the other, of the flattening of otherness. And it will not be excessive to warn that philosophy is not, and cannot be, an instrument of consolation; because it relates to absolute difference, to difference itself, it is always scrutinizing its own certainties, abandoning its convictions, liquidating its prejudices, always ready to lose its ground. Nonetheless, we should not forget that although it cannot serve as consolation, nor as justification, nor as remedy, nor as solution, nor as final answer, perhaps it can work as an arena, as a *topos* of ceaseless search for, and opening of, new possibilities.

When we look at truth as one of the great issues of contemporary philosophy and seek in it a clear and unequivocal answer to this huge topic, perhaps we must look again with redoubled attention. In effect, since its beginnings, philosophy as a theory of difference, or science of the singular, has never failed to offer a multiplicity of approaches to the question of truth. Let's start at the beginning.

From the very beginning, Plato had not one, but three conceptions of truth. In the *Ménon*, truth is presented as a justified belief, that is, it is linked and tied to reality by a reasonable explanation (*aitias logismos*). Thus, provided it is justified, an opinion acquires the status of truth, and is therefore indistinguishable from fact. As an explanation of his theory, Plato uses the famous example of the road to Larissa: those who have never been there, but know how to show the way, are as useful as those who have been there. Plato thus presents, before any other philosopher, a coherentist theory of truth, where falsehood is produced in the absence of an internal consistency in the formulation. Already in the *Republic*, an

ontological theory of truth is presented: only certain entities, certain instances of reality – the ideas – are true, as that which has the status of being truly real. Finally, in the *Sophist*, a conception of truth as a correspondence between a proposition and a state of affairs is assumed. Plato, however, is aware of the problem posed by propositions that have no correspondence with an actual state of affairs – e.g., "Theaetetus flies" – which leads him to resort to a theory of the image. In this case, the false proposition is that of an image of that which is not, of non-being. Thus, even though it is an image of that which is, the bad copy is an image that does not represent all the characteristics of the thing that is, and is therefore false.

Betting on the same metric, Aristotle adds three more formulations of truth to the philosophical heritage. In *Metaphysics*, truth consists in affirming the conjunction or disjunction of propositions: the horse is white, or the horse is not white. In this case, truth is not found in things, but in the adequacy between what we say and the way things are. It is the famous theory of truth as correspondence between the substance (horse) and the accident (white) within a proposition: "truth is to say that it is what it is, and to say that it is not what it is not" (1011b25), Aristotle states, enunciating a theory already proposed by Plato in the *Sophist*, but which now returns from an ontological basis. Beyond this, an alternative conception of truth can be seen in the *Poetics*, when Aristotle brings the poet closer to the philosopher. In chapter IX, the poet is presented as one who makes the possible happen, according to verisimilitude and necessity. In this way, by referring to the universal, poetry meets philosophy. At the same time, because what may happen is more extensive than what has happened, and because what matters is the universal, the poet gives reality to what might have happened, to what can happen, to possible worlds, thus formulating a theory of truth as verisimilitude. Finally, in his treatise on persuasion, Aristotle presents *Rhetoric* as the science of the technique of producing belief. Even assuming that truth and justice are stronger than their contraries, Aristotle knows that it is decisive to create techniques that make these contraries

impossible, that make it impossible for truth and justice to be defeated. It is in the context of such inquiries that truth is presented as a production of beliefs inside an auditorium.

Another unsurpassable milestone is Kant. And, although he never defined what truth is, and thereby contributed to the debates around the opacity of its nature, Kant does not fail to address the question in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. By displacing the question to the legislation of the conditions of true knowledge, his originality consists in making it dependent on the subject. In this way, the manifestation of Kantian truth is not in things, but in the subject that has the possibility of summoning them. However, by considering the subject as a set of faculties, Kant will not make a theory of truth, but a theory of knowledge: an investigation of the conditions that make a particular knowledge legitimate.

On the other hand, in *Ideas*, Husserl rehabilitates a theory of truth as correspondence, based on his notion of evidence. For Husserl, all knowledge involves two dimensions: a cognitive and an epistemic (or doxica) dimension, which is the dimension of belief. The evidence of something is the cognitive apprehension of an object accompanied by a belief in its certainty. However – and this is the novelty that Husserl introduces in order to promote phenomenology as a rigorous science – belief can be removed from experience without becoming false. When belief is suspended (époché), experience is sustained only by semantics, by the set of propositions that describe the thing that is given to me as the object of knowledge. The époché becomes the method of Husserlian philosophy, because it is through this suspension that presuppositions, prejudices, and beliefs of an intentional consciousness are neutralized, preventing them from interfering with the cognitive dimension of what is given as the object of knowledge. With this, truth is based on the correspondence between what appears – what is given to my consciousness – duly filtered by the époché and the reality of the world.

In total dissidence with his master, in *The Essence of Truth*, Heidegger presents a conception of truth as unveiling, as manifestation. Motivated by the Greek notion of *alétheia* (non-forgetfulness), he proposes the thesis that philosophy has been forgetting the being of being, and has thereby diminished this primordial questioning to the subsidiary dimension of the being of the being, the being of things, as epiphenomenon of the fundamental question. Here, truth is far from describing an objective state. Rather, the essence of truth unveils itself from the privileged position that human finitude provides: knowing that I am going to die makes me a being-in-project, discloses the notion of freedom that allows me to be in anticipation of my choices, and makes the world a set of possibilities.

In the *Logical-Philosophical Treatise*, while trying to solve the problem inherited from Russell between semantics and a state of things, Wittgenstein proposes to draft an ontology of states of things. It is the famous pictorial theory of the world, that our propositions paint the states of affairs, that words are the picture of the world. Later, in *Philosophical Investigations*, the philosopher corrects his initial trajectory with the new thesis that there is no inexorable and univocal relation between the thing and its sign, between the object to be represented and its linguistic representation, but rather a multiplicity of possibilities for the object to be represented, made effective through the subject's intentionality. It is the theory of language games.

In *How to make our ideas clear?*, Peirce advances a pragmatic conception of truth. By assuming that knowledge is belief, he sees his thesis unfold into two dimensions: 1) psychological, in which truth is that which calms my perplexity, assuming that most truths are intended to console and to appease our anguish; 2) performative, in which truth is that which produces effects that can be confirmed.

Last but not least, Michel Foucault, in his last cycle of lessons collected and published under the title *The courage of truth*, presents his proposal about what truth could be in philosophy. In his view, inspired by Socrates and the Cynics, truth

is no longer a cognitive operation of intellectual apprehension of the world, but an act of courage, an ethical determination. The figure of veracity may be personified in the one who speaks frankly, who speaks the truth, the *parrhesiast*. But this telling of the truth is not dependent on the truth-value of the articulated enunciations. The telling of the truth that characterizes the *parrhesiast* represents the singular case in which the production of a way of life, a mode of subjectivation – a certain way of feeling, thinking, and acting – constitutes an ethos, that is, is in itself a proposal of the world. But the exemplarity of such a way of life, recognized by all as unique and typical of a certain individual, can only be proven true in confrontation with an ultimate proof. For the Greeks that Foucault summons, it is only in a disadvantageous power relation, in an onerous asymmetry, that an ethos can be determined as true, because it is only there, when life itself is given as a pledge of one's own life, or when life is threatened with death, that one can gauge the courage that will weld, in an unbreakable solidarity, a feeling, a thinking, and an acting expressing a recognizable, and therefore true, form of life.

One conclusion that we can draw from this brief anthology of conceptions of truth is that philosophy – as its own history attests – could never offer a univocal answer to the question of truth. Because it was generated in an agonistic regime among free human beings, philosophy can only produce a profusion of theses that rival each other, even allowing the same author to initiate contending theses. Concerning truth, philosophy gives us its best lesson when it tells us: produce it, while producing yourselves with it. This is what philosophy has been doing, while making itself.

Accordingly, in our Special Issue, the authors, conceptions and contexts in which the problematic of truth and falsehood appear are various. The reader will notice that – with the exception of a "case study" by Professor Tiago Marques, invited to report his experience as a scientist in the face of the uses (and abuses) of statistics in the understanding of the global health crisis we still live in – all the other

contributions approach the theme from broader, more abstract, and more distant points of view, although not at all indifferent to the problem that plagues us today.

We can only hope that the set of ideas reflected here can, to some extent, contribute to the deepening of these issues, closely linked at present to the specific scenario of the pandemic, but relating to countless other clashes between science, politics, art, and society. Including those yet to come.