

Conversational Truth

3.

” For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice.”
Pilate said to him, “What is truth?”

John 18:38 (Revised Standard Version)

Plato was not offended by the assumption that there are contrary opinions or sense perceptions. He makes this point himself . . . Plato's quarrel was with the assumption that these differences of opinion had anything to do with knowledge. Where Protagoras seemed to deny the existence of truths beyond the hurley-burley of conflicting opinion, Plato argued that beneath opinion lay the reality of things: their "eternal and unchanging form." Knowledge, as opposed to opinion, derives from these hidden and constant forms. Because Protagoras and other relativist-minded sophists did not look for this reality behind differences of opinion, they were merely "lovers of opinion," and not true "lovers of wisdom."

Michael Billig, *Arguing and Thinking* p. 43

Aristotle's principle of non-contradiction¹ states that “A thing cannot be both true and not true, in the same respect, at the same time.” This principle is the cornerstone of classical logic: Truth is an absolute property of meaningful statements. True assertions are universally true – true for everyone, everywhere and at all times. False assertions are just as universally false. There may be uncertainty; we may not know the truth value of some given statement. But, in principle, all meaningful statements are either one or the other.

In the domains where classical logic applies, the goal of reason is simply to decide what is true. Aristotle knew very well that appearances could be deceiving and that arguments could be specious. But he believed it might be possible to see through the deceptive appearances, reject invalid arguments, and thereby penetrate beneath the shifting dunes of impression and opinion to a bed rock of firm truths. Through this program, he and many followers hoped to erect an edifice of valid knowledge, whose intellectual authority would extend over all reasonable persons everywhere.

The scandal of interpretations puts paid to this hope. Where significant alternatives of interpretation can be raised – almost everywhere, as it turns out – the classical concept of truth does not apply. Outside carefully protected domains of discourse (e.g. the formal domains of mathematics), we no longer

¹ See Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Chapter 7.

know what it means to assert that a statement is *true*, nor to reject one as *false*. The problem is that interpretations are not true or false in any clear, traditional sense. They are best seen as cognitive strategies, deployed by some individual to appropriate the world for his own purposes – as he pleases, or as best he can. As such, they may be appropriate or inappropriate, convenient or inconvenient, embraced or resisted, but they are neither true nor false. They are simply the way a given individual is seeing things.



For example: The drawing on the right was devised by Gestalt psychologists to show that we interpret the whole of an image before we know what to make of its parts. It is deliberately ambiguous, and can be seen either as an old gypsy woman or as a young one. If we see the young woman, her face is turned to her right, away from us, and the lines at the left middle of the drawing outline her cheek and chin; if we see the old woman, her face is shown in profile, and those same lines represent her nose. The meaning of the picture, then, is not simply given by our recognition of its parts. On the contrary, as will be discussed in Section 5.2, the meaning of parts and wholes are mutually interdependent.

Now, suppose I really cannot see the young woman, try as I may; and I tell you that the picture is *truly* of an old woman, insisting that you are wrong to see the young one. Such a claim only demonstrates my foolishness, and the limited character of my perception, because I cannot tell you what you are seeing and because you are as much entitled to your interpretation of the drawing as I am to mine. There is no way to settle such a dispute. Even the artist's intentions would not be conclusive since, in the last resort, he is just one more viewer and interpreter of his work. Notoriously, artists are not always good judges of their own creations.

To insist that my perception of the drawing is the true or correct one, is to commit what is called a *category error*: to use the concept of truth in a context where it cannot apply. There can be no absolutely true interpretation of the drawing. If some person claims to see a chicken or a chipmunk, we might think him a little weird, but would have no basis for saying he is wrong. On the face of it, he has as much right to his chicken as you have to your young woman or I to my old one.

This situation is quite general. You may or may not be able to follow

someone's interpretation – to see some matter as he does – but you can have no basis for saying that his interpretation is false, any more than he has for saying it is true. (To be sure, Nietzsche's point, that perception always requires an act of interpretation – the choice of a cognitive strategy to isolate a piece of the world, and render it intelligible – is itself an interpretation, but one that proves very difficult to resist with intellectual honesty.) All that most statements are able to assert is that the person who makes it is seeing a matter in some particular way.

Of course, there are many situations where some interpretation is held in common by almost everyone with a claim to seriousness; and in these cases, we can still speak of "*facts*" with the confidence of being with the consensus. In this sense, it is a fact that the Earth is roughly spherical in shape; that Archduke Ferdinand was assassinated at Sarajevo in June, 1914; that my desk is a cluttered mess just now. However, such "facts" no longer have the comforting solidity of absolute Truths. They are always relative to some overarching paradigm of theory or practice that everyone² shares, and that no one at this time wishes to question.

Thus, when we speak of a fact today, we simply mean an interpretation that all parties are willing to stipulate – that no one finds it worthwhile to challenge; and we must bear in mind that such consensual facticity may break down at any time. At any moment some clown may rise up to insist that the Earth is not truly spherical; that the couple assassinated at Sarajevo were doubles of the Archduke and Duchess; that my desk is actually quite orderly, since everything on it is exactly where I put it. The result is that the prospects for authentic public knowledge are not bright – if by public knowledge we mean a corpus of statements true always and for everyone. No discipline where conflicting human values and interests are at stake can hope for honest consensus. Accordingly, none can qualify as a branch of "knowledge" in the classical sense: History, economics, anthropology, psychology, even certain aspects of biology and physiology, to an extent that is itself a matter for interpretation and dispute, are matters of taste, fashion and prevailing interest – and can be expected to remain so. Even the foundations of physics are now highly controversial. The result is that what was once conceived as a grand edifice of knowledge comes to look more like a big city. In its downtown core are many towers, each the headquarters of a separate empire. In each building there are thousands of offices and desks, each with its special interests and its quantum of autonomy and power – and with incumbents whose perceptions and goals are fairly predictable from the positions they occupy. As the saying

² Everyone with a voice and a seat at the table. The easiest way to establish a fact is to marginalize and ignore all persons who do not share it as an interpretation.

goes, "Where a man stands depends on where he sits."

Not only values and choices, but the perceptions behind these are in perpetual conflict; and the most intractable issues turn on differing preferences of interpretation. The controversies over abortion law or medically assisted suicide are good examples: In the early stages of pregnancy some people see a cluster of undifferentiated cells; others see a human person, entitled to the protection of the state against its own mother, if necessary. In a terminal illness, some see death as a medical and social event, presenting certain options to the patient and his attending physician. Others see death, like life itself, as the gift of God – to be left in His hands alone. In both cases, the clash of perceptions leads to bitter conflict. Faced with such radical differences of perception, how should elected legislators proceed toward the formulation of just and viable law?

Without the understanding that interpretations are neither true nor false, the incumbents at their desks and pulpits can scarcely talk to one another, let alone learn to live with their differences. The result is the familiar condition of our post-modern world: a private chamber of interpreted "truth" for each sub-culture, each interest group, each individual mind. We may – we probably should – rejoice in the personal freedom afforded by this diversity. At the same time, we cannot help but recognize, that it raises very difficult political and intellectual problems.

From the viewpoint of any secular government – any government whose authority does not repose on dogmatically held ideological or theocratic foundations – all public issues are more or less vulnerable to interpretation. Every issue divides the polity into competing coalitions – each with its own convinced adherents, living in their own social worlds, and with their own preferred interpretations. Under these conditions, the committees of stakeholders and experts become frustrated and deadlocked. Partial frustration of their agendas is in the nature of politics, but much of their intellectual frustration may be blamed on the Western philosophical tradition which does real damage – both intellectually and practically – by raising expectations that cannot be met. Science urges, "If we collect the data, truth will be clear; the uncertainties and conflicts will go away." But this never happens. More and harder data shifts the grounds of dispute, but can never enforce a single "natural", interpretation. It merely transforms the argument, raising methodological issues about data collection and interpretation. A thorny, divisive issue remains thorny no matter how many studies are done.

In this predicament, we lack a theoretical basis to usefully compare, let alone reconcile, people's conflicting experiences and perceptions. With good rhetorical skills, or a hefty public relations budget, we may seduce others to our persuasion but otherwise, we have no real idea of how to handle differences of

interpretation. Argument is futile because each side plays by its own rules. Formal debates have winners and losers when the matter comes to a vote, but tend to polarize opinion and certainly do not motivate the contenders to acknowledge and accommodate each other's concerns. Education then becomes a battleground, since in the last resort, no one can claim to teach a branch of knowledge, but only to propagate his own cultural tradition. Indeed, with no way either to prove or refute a case, it is not easy – with the best will in the world – for cognitive adversaries to sit down and “reason together.” No one understands what it would mean to do so; and it appears that divisive issues must be settled by a contest of power, unless the parties can agree to leave each other alone. A dominant culture or its establishment may impose its viewpoint through control of the channels of communication, but there can be no genuine public Truth and no basis for classical Reason. Without these, seemingly, there can be no philosophical space for a genuine *res publica* – no domain of public business and public interest, distinct from the agenda of a power elite and its special interests. This collapse of the ideas of public truth, public knowledge and public values is much more than a theoretical problem. It has been a disaster for the business of government. Our question is, does this disaster have a remedy?

3.1 Visions of Truth

The founders of Western philosophy hoped to save the Greek *polis* by covering over its cultural diversity and class conflict (to be expected in any commercial society) with a myth of absolute Truth. That myth did not avert the subjugation of Greece, first in the Macedonian then in the Roman Empire, but it endured in Western philosophy for 2500 years. It is crumbling today, as the whole world painfully knits together into a global society, because our differences run too deep, and are too strongly held, to paper over.

For a global society, in the long run, there are only two alternatives: either a more plural and polyphonic version of reason (as the Sophists might have developed); or else some grand myth, imposed through high rhetoric and vast political power upon the world's imagination. Before standing up too staunchly for Truth today, we should imagine the holy wars and inquisitions required to make it prevail. Indeed, we need not imagine them, but can read about them in our daily newspapers. Some form of polyphonic reason really does seem the better alternative.

Lawyers and rhetoricians that they were, the Sophists saw divergence of interpretation not as intellectual scandal, but as the stuff of their profession. Like their counterparts today, they were in the persuasion business; and truth for them was what a jury could be persuaded to believe. However, in such bald terms, this position is unacceptable because it really does seem to make a

difference whether the accused is factually guilty. In the last analysis, the Sophists lost to philosophy because it cannot be meaningless, even for lawyers, to wonder whether the jury got it right. It cannot be meaningless to raise the possibility that our best available interpretation of a situation may in time be given the lie as further evidence and stronger interpretations are found. At the same time, we must accept that for every practical purpose, here and now, there is no source of truth beyond *someone's* interpretation of the available evidence – or of holy scripture, come to that. It is a central problem for thought to do justice to both these intuitions. Then, what grip can reason find, if we grant Nietzsche's point (as I think we must) that all cognition depends on acts of interpretation, which are value-laden by nature?

In situations of disagreement, various attitudes are possible. The classical attitude, starting from the assumption that all beliefs are either True or False, might be called *Absolute Rationalism*; and its great strength is to encourage people to be articulate in their ideas, and to argue staunchly for them. It entails an extraordinary respect for words and language – for the *Logos*, to use the Greek term. More than any other factor, probably, this respect for language (and for the kind of knowledge that language makes possible) gave the West its decisive advantages from the 15th century until the early 20th. In such brutally pragmatic terms, the superiority of classical rationalism might seem to be a matter of record; and for many, this remains a decisive argument in its favour.

Absolute Rationalism has the following drawback, however: If I identify objective Truth with my own interpretation (as we are always tempted to do) then, whenever we happen to disagree about something, I am compelled by my idea of logic to insist that I am right and you are wrong. If Truth is a single edifice, and you and I differ on some point, then only one of us can be right. Since I believe in the truth and justice of my own position (who doesn't?), I must conclude that the error is yours. Even with the greatest epistemological charity, I can attribute to persons who disagree with me only a watered-down, corrupted version of my own (true) understanding. When feeling less charitable, I must believe them either fools or villains.

If I think you are wrong on some matter, you probably think the same about me. When two or more believers get together, they are apt to decide that anyone who disagrees with them is evil or stupid – probably not completely human. The result, too frequently, is a conflict whose costs are larger than anything at stake in the original dispute. In this way, the doctrine of Unitary Truth leads to gulags, insane asylums, inquisitions and burning of heretics. The history of religion in the Western world has been especially prone to doctrinal wars at least partly because Truth for it has not been a question of market share but of public monopoly.

On the other hand, if we accept that the categories *true* and *false* do not apply to matters of interpretation, we find ourselves outside the realm of classical philosophy. Indeed, the quest for knowledge becomes deeply problematical; and we find ourselves in a pickle, facing several alternatives, none entirely satisfactory:

The first of these is fallibilism, a kind of meta-belief that one's own most strongly held beliefs could be wrong. The fallibilist accepts the idea of absolute truth, but recognizes human fallibility: our propensities for wishful thinking, willful blindness, slovenly thinking, and every other source of error. While he believes in the existence of truth, he remains doubtful that anybody, himself included, has much of it. He tries not to take his own beliefs very seriously. Such intellectual humility is attractive but, like atheism in a foxhole, it can be difficult to maintain. When it comes to laying bets, I have no choice but to back my own opinion. Yes, of course, either or both of us could be mistaken. But then, so what? I still do not know how to handle our disagreements; and the diffidence that follows from a sincere fallibilism will impede my own cause, more often than not. At best, what fallibilism teaches is intellectual caution, which is sometimes a good thing, sometimes not.

Alternatively, in the interests of smooth negotiation, I can take the line that questions of right and truth are meaningless. An apt name for this position might be *lawyerly* or *pragmatic relativism* – since for a lawyer in working hours, truth is just a matter of persuasion. It was this "sophistical" contempt for reality, that Plato opposed; and he had a point as we have seen. In rejecting Platonic idealism for its tendencies toward dogmatism and intellectual pugnacity, we also want to avoid the dangers of an extreme *pragmatism* that has lost all interest in the merits of a case. We must not lose sight of the distinction between being convicted of a crime, and being actually guilty of it.

A slightly different form of relativism grants to every culture a right to its own values, paradigms, customs and beliefs; it insists that argument between these is fruitless, and that criticism of another person's culture is bad manners. *Cultural relativism* is less cynical than the pragmatic, lawyerly type, but its consequences can be more dangerous: Its commitment to tolerance keeps the peace for a while by refusing to join issue with a cognitive adversary. In the longer run, however, this stance offers no guidance in resolving personal and cultural disputes or in forming public policy. For example, in countries like the United States or Canada, where cultural tolerance is relatively wide but not unlimited, it provides no basis for challenging and condemning practices like clitorrectomy or the immolation of widows that fall outside the bounds of what the majority can bring themselves to accept. (If we have no grounds for condemning such cultural practices, it seems irrational and even bigoted to do so.) Thus, beginning from the amiable discovery that different folk-ways are

worthy of understanding on their own terms, cultural relativism tends at the limit toward a certain sponginess of mind and spirit, with no firm convictions, and no skills of judgment or negotiation.

At a limit of cultural relativism is the view that every individual lives, ultimately, in a private culture of his own. This position takes the easy-going tolerance of cultural relativism to the level of interpersonal relationship, where it turns out to suffer from the same fatal drawback: In principle, we want to allow people to “do their own things.” Unfortunately, when people's "things" collide, it suggests no means beyond sheer power to decide the issue.

Finally, there is the view called *positivism* which restricts the class of meaningful questions to those whose answers can be falsified by operational means. If a theory could never be proven false, the positivists claim, it is for that reason vacuous. A question must be considered empty if its alternative answers cannot be tested. But positivist epistemology excludes too much – banning all questions of ethics and aesthetics, for example. Further, positivism demands a rigorous distinction between “facts” and “values,” with the latter firmly banished from scientific discourse. As soon as this distinction becomes blurred, as it must in every one of the humane or social sciences, the whole program is forlorn. Its self-imposed constraint – that only falsifiable statements shall be considered meaningful – leaves thought with nothing to think about.

The view to be explored here departs from all of the above. Similar to perspectivism in accepting that everyone has a right to his own viewpoint, it rejects the claim that such viewpoints are incommensurable. On the contrary, it insists that viewpoints are daily measured against each other, as they jostle each other in the same world. Generically, the process by which viewpoints and cognitive positions take each other's measure is known as conversation. Accordingly, what we'll call truth or knowledge will be an attribute not of individual viewpoints and positions, but of a whole conversation process.

3.2 Truth As a Structure of Argument

There are many rooms in my father's house.

John 14-2

The root idea is that arguments and conversations, are not necessarily unsatisfactory or unfinished when they fail to converge to flat Aristotelian truths. When conversation articulates the views on a disputed issue, renders these mutually intelligible, and juxtaposes them in creative tension, it reaches what we may think of as a kind of truth. Even when thoroughly deadlocked, we may consider it has reached truth if it achieves what we call "a meeting of minds" – i.e. when it succeeds in rendering its participants' perceptions and concerns mutually intelligible and available to each other's understanding, criticism, and negotiation. Conversely, when the discourse is rigged to enthrone one

viewpoint while denying fair hearing to the others, it has lapsed into a kind of falsehood. Participation in honest conversation – conversation of substantial *integrity* (as we shall call it) – is always enlightening. Regardless of personal commitments and interests, we come away from it with deepened understanding of our own concerns and those of others, of the issues between us, and of what (if anything) can be done about these concerns. By contrast, corrupt conversation – of scant or defective integrity – is misleading and alienating: The more we immerse ourselves in its games, the less we understand; and the more perplexed, distracted, deluded, and generally wrong-headed we become.

Following this train of thought, we can understand the truth of individual statements as an inheritance from the conversations in which they were formed, and in which they compete for credence. Single truth represents the collapse of an argument to the triviality of a flat statement. The cat is on the mat: He is sleeping right there. We all see him, and we all agree. There is no argument about it – or, more precisely, the argument has converged to consensus on a simple truth. When such convergence does not occur, the outcome is not flat propositional truth, but what we'll call a structure of argument. And it is this structure, as a whole, that we'll identify with the humanly known truth on any vexed and controversial matter. As in the parable of the elephant, such truth emerges slowly, from congruencies and differences of articulated experience among "blind men" who are constantly comparing notes, and drawing public attention to discrepancies. Convergence to single truth is never inevitable, never a foregone conclusion. It occurs only as a limiting case, in situations where the authentic experiences of all participants point toward and reinforce a common conclusion.

The nature of reasoned argument, and the problem of comparing divergent viewpoints and positions therein, are questions to be discussed later. The idea is clear, however: **On any issue, it is the pattern of reasoned understanding and argument among contending positions that constitutes a (polyphonic) truth.** This structure of contrasting, complementary and competing positions may be thought of as a kind of *tensegrity*³), an edifice of thought that stands up as a stable pattern of tensile forces. Thus, truth becomes an attribute of the whole conversation process,

³ Unlike conventional buildings, which stand by resisting gravitational compression, tensegrities stand because their structural members resist stretch. Fuller's geodesic dome is the famous example. On a similar principle, an orbiting space station maintains its shape due to centrifugal forces generated by its spin around a central axis. These forces would make the station fly apart, but for the tensed beams holding it together.

and not the articulation of any single viewpoint, however wise or well informed. The full answer to any question – the public truth – will be the whole tensegrity of argument around it. Every viewpoint of substantial integrity can be accepted as making some contribution to public truth, while the tensions and contradictions among viewpoints can be accepted as resulting from divergences of value, life experience, and preferences (or just habits) of interpretation.

Following this thought, we arrive at an altered conception of knowledge that agrees neither with the absolutism of classical philosophy nor with contemporary consensualism or relativism. What we'll think of as *public knowledge* is a shared understanding of the argument structure, held in common by people who have, as we say, gotten their heads around it – and arrived at some consensus on its scope and structure. This is something more than an agreement to disagree; it is a mutual understanding of which specific concerns and issues are in dispute. On vexed issues, it will often be possible to get the parties to sign off a jointly acceptable description of the argument between them when it would be impossible to get them to endorse any consensus or compromise position.

In ordinary speech, we call this kind of joint understanding a *meeting of minds*. Without necessarily agreeing in their viewpoints, interests or interpretations, the adversaries at least come to a shared understanding of each other's thinking: of how each other's minds work on this matter. Such shared understanding, not of the issue itself, but of the state of argument around the issue, is what we'll mean by *public knowledge*. Our strategy is to pin a renewed conception of reason to this notion of a *meeting of minds*, rather than to that of *conclusive argument* – which, as we are aware, usually concludes nothing.

The approach is less eccentric than may appear, since the idea of truth as a structure of reasoned argument reduces to flat, propositional truth in many cases. And then, as we'll see, even when permanent disagreements prevent such convergence, the idea of *polyphonic truth* still affords most of what we need from logic and epistemology: a cognitive schema to guide our thinking away from incoherence and confusion, to support and inform us in making personal choices, to serve as a point of departure for further study and argument, and to support the accumulation of personal and public knowledge. Indeed, it is not surprising that polyphonic truth avails in all these ways, because it's what we have always made do with in contentious situations, while pushing truth claims of the classical kind.

It's worth re-emphasizing that a polyphonic conception of truth still allows many "questions of fact" (as we call them) to be answered with a flat *yes* or *no*. Is the cat on the mat? Is there a stop sign at that intersection? Did Columbus reach the Americas in 1492? So long as the question does not give

rise to controversy, its tensegrity of argument collapses either toward affirmation or denial. It is even clear that some questions must have a factual answer, even if no one knows what it is, or if there is controversy about it. When the jury is asked “Is Smith guilty as charged?”, it is reasonable to demand that they strive for a simple verdict of Guilty or Not Guilty – whether or not they can reach consensus based on the evidence presented. We might call this issue of guilt an *Aristotelian* question (less tendentious than calling it a question of fact) – because it seems to possess a definite answer, to which classical logic would apply. Similarly, the speed of light and the charge of an electron are Aristotelian questions, provided only that physicists can give precise operational meanings to these concepts. But it is not an Aristotelian question whether destruction of the week-old foetus is murder, because it cannot help but be a contentious matter of interpretation whether the foetus is seen as an undifferentiated cluster of cells, or as a human person entitled to the protection of law. Thus, polyphonic truth leaves ample room for “facts”, and for Aristotelian questions of fact. It defines a question of fact as one believed to have a definite answer⁴ once definitions of all its terms are stipulated. At the same time, it accepts that there are many perfectly meaningful and urgent questions that are not matters of fact, but of value and interpretation. And it notes that even questions that we regard as matters of fact may cease to be so at any time.

Further, and as we’ll see later, it holds that not all truth claims are created equal. What gives weight to a specific truth claim is neither consensus nor pragmatic convenience, but the *integrity* of conversation behind it. It is experience and argument of substantial integrity that gives a conversation (and its conclusions) such epistemic value as they possess. Reason endorses one interpretation or truth-claim over another because it is backed by a tighter pattern of experience and argument.

Knowable truth is not absolute and eternal, but rather a construct of conversation. Nonetheless, it usually enjoys a certain durability, because arguments tend to be chronic. Beneath the contradictions and quarrels, we recognize truth by a structure of argument, and by perennial concerns underlying that structure. To this extent, conversational truth is fairly stable and may transcend interpretation. Try as we may to interpret the issue out of existence, it comes back to haunt us, and the same patterns of argument rebuild themselves again and again. “Throw it out the door, and it comes in through the window,” as a Russian proverb has it. **Reality is what refuses to go away.**

Thus, *conversationalism* (to give this epistemology a name) differs

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An answer the assertion of which will be unambiguously true or false.

from *consensualism*, on one hand, but also from *pragmatism* and *relativism* on the other. Roughly, the consensualist identifies “truth” with “what everyone believes”. His position fails to deal satisfactorily with the possibility that everyone may be deluded. The pragmatist identifies “truth” with practical usefulness. His position either ignores differences of opinion regarding value and usefulness, or falls into relativism. The relativist stops at the insight that “from his own viewpoint, everybody is right”, and allows everyone to enjoy the interpretations that suit him best. This stance offers no ground for comparison or reasoned argument among contending viewpoints and positions. Indeed, it all but forecloses the possibility of dialogue, and leads to a form of intellectual solipsism. By contrast, for us the idea of truth is a careless way of claiming that the structure of argument around some question has knowledge value. In the general case, such understanding will be plural and polyphonic and can be represented only as a documented argument. Only when argument collapses to consensus (and to a rather simple consensus at that), can understanding be represented by a flat statement.

To make a statement is to suggest and vouch for the position it represents. If I tell you there is a cat on the mat, I am suggesting that you think of her as being there and, implicitly, promising that if you glance in that direction you may see her for yourself. If I assert there is a God in Heaven, or that the week-old foetus is a human person, I am suggesting these as interpretations of human existence and, implicitly, recommending them. But to assert a statement as *true* says rather more than making the statement itself – although, in classical logic, and for Aristotelian questions even today, the two claims are logically equivalent. If I tell you it is *true* that there is a God in Heaven, or *true* that the week-old foetus is a human person, I am not only suggesting these as interpretations, but insisting that there are no important rival interpretations worth thinking about. But, in fact, there are no grounds for such a claim. A “pro-lifer” is certainly entitled to think and suggest that the foetus is a human person, but a “pro-choicer” is equally entitled to think and suggest the contrary. Either can find grounds satisfying to himself that support his own position or raise some embarrassments for his opponent’s, but neither has grounds to assert the absolute truth of his position. The godly are entitled to live in a sacred world if they choose, but have no right to disturb atheists in their secular one. And conversely, of course. They can still argue and negotiate reasonably, as we’ll see later, provided they are willing to respect each other’s interpretive autonomy.

The public truth in such disputes is found in their structures of argument. If someone wants to learn what is known about some controversial issue, he can do nothing better than “get his head around” the strongest cases that can be made for each position. In effect, truth and knowledge on the matter are an

attribute of a whole conversation. The various positions are just interpretive strategies, as Nietzsche said.

We shall be exploring this conversational notion of truth for the remainder of this book, along with its implications for several closely related concepts: understanding, argument, knowledge and choice. Meanwhile, it's worth underlining that the issues at point in this book are themselves not Aristotelian in nature, and cannot be expected to have definite true or false answers. Like all philosophical questions, they too are matters of interpretation, of cognitive strategy. Any answers given them can be suggestions only, more or less closely, honestly and convincingly supported by experience and argument.

3.3 Toward a Conversational Paradigm

The question put aside at the end of Chapter 1 can now be put more succinctly: What becomes of the notion of reason in a world apprehended only through conversation?" We do not say, ". . . apprehended only through discourse ." It is simply not the case that everything we know is mediated by language. Animals manage without it, and much of human learning occurs at a pre-linguistic level of sensory-motor recognition and habit.⁵

On the other hand, it is correct to say the world is apprehended through conversation, with this term taken in the broad sense of the last chapter. That, indeed, has been the crucial post-modern discovery: All cognition depends on acts of interpretation. For human beings, most (or it may be all) conscious acts of interpretation are crucially mediated by culture and language.

The world that we inhabit is construed through an intimate collaboration of sensory-motor and linguistic processes. Our response to suggestions received from things around us is also moulded by the available repertoires of a culture, as disclosed to us through the exchange of suggestions (verbal and otherwise) with our interlocutors. As we live, conversation lives through us. In that conversation, we ourselves are late-coming participants.

We must not drop either side of this epistemological condition: That we are *late-comers* to conversation means that we inherit skills and ideas from the cultures and languages into which we are born, or that we later come to join. For each of us, cultural inheritance is a limitation we can never wholly escape;

⁵ You can convince yourself of the secondary character of language in large areas of your own cognition by trying to write a full description of the furnishings of your own home, or by trying to write step-by-step instructions for some complex task that you can perform "automatically" (as we say), without thinking of the steps involved. Both tasks are difficult, precisely because the knowledge involved is not primarily mediated by words and concepts. Much of our orientation in the world is sensual and unconscious – directed by language only in general and superficial ways. Try explaining, just with words, precisely how to ride a bicycle, or throw a ball, or tie a shoe lace.

our lives are encircled by the horizons of this inheritance.

That we are *participants* means that viewpoint and agency must be attributed to us, and that we exercise powers of criticism, recombination and invention in our received cultures. We do not merely perpetuate our cultural roles; we use the roles to express ourselves, and we react against them. We do not take or leave culture as we find it.

The idea of society as a conversation, and of ourselves as late-coming participants therein, suggests more specific conclusions about our cognitive predicament:

- 1) Because all perception is perception *as* something else – an assimilation of present sensation to pre-existing categories – and because we find our categories ready-made by the conversation that has preceded our participation, it follows that we inhabit worlds of meaning already largely prepared for us. And yet, whoever comes to understand his situation in these terms will realize that the conversation which owns him is also his to take possession of and own – to join, play in, and influence as best he can. We belong to the conversation, it might be said; yet, at the same time, it belongs to us.
- 2) The *abductive* method of science – the formulation, testing and revision of tentative hypotheses – is a formal version of the conditions for any knowledge whatever. All knowledge involves the deployment of skills and categories and ideas (derived from a cultural conversation), and then the checking of these against experience gained in their use. The embarrassments that sometimes result eventually lead to their revision. In this way, both the conversation and its cognitive culture are continually evolving.
- 3) The possibility of “scientific” knowledge is limited to domains in which both the prevailing cognitive culture and the experience gained in its light are sufficiently shareable to qualify as “public” for most practical purposes. We can have a science of physics, because experimental measurements of time, distance, mass, charge, and the like are publicly replicable. We can have a (rather less satisfactory) science of child psychology (for example) to the extent that many aspects of children’s behaviour can be recorded for public review in formats leaving relatively little room for interpretation. Of English literature or Chinese painting, say, where experience and tastes are individual, there can scarcely be any science beyond the establishment of authorships and dates. About aesthetics, there can be conversation but no public *knowledge* in anything like the classical sense.
- 4) Since all experience is ultimately a matter of interpretation, the possibility of public knowledge (as classically conceived) in even the

hardest disciplines like physics lasts only so long as the required interpretations are stipulated. Because it is difficult to claim that a recorded measurement reads 6.8 when everyone else gets values hovering around 5.2, the science of physics is fairly durable. Because no two historians will read the documents and other surviving evidence of a period in the same way, history is at best a conversation of competent scholars, with a number of stipulated “facts” and a great many disputed interpretations. When the idea of “competence” itself becomes a battleground, there can be no classical knowledge at all.

- 5) We have to construe, talk about, and (as best we can) come to terms with our “cultural” realities, just as with “natural” reality. Indeed, this very distinction is rather arbitrary since we know nothing about either except as construed through some particular conversation. We are involved too closely, and with too many conflicting interests, to have much knowledge even of our own culture, in the classical sense. Accordingly, we must either conceive some non-classical form of knowledge about the social world, or else resign ourselves to living in a hubbub of competing claims, one as self-serving as another.

The Nietzschean scandal of interpretations overturns classical ideas of Truth, and marks the end of an epoch for the Western intellectual tradition. Yet it disturbs our *theory* of reason much more than it need disturb our *practices* of reasoning, and of being reasonable. This should not be surprising, since we have long been developing skills and institutions to cope with divergent interpretations in relative civility. Indeed, that is just what civility and civilization mean: the art of living at peace in cities, among people whose sensibilities and customs are greatly different from our own. At the same time, it becomes more obvious each day that no story about absolute Truth can thrive in the post-modern world, which is now too diverse and too inter-dependent for this myth to be useful. Whoever insists on absolute Truth these days must end up at war with the whole world, in the effort to impose his own. What we need, therefore, is some new paradigm of reason that teaches respect and a norm of reciprocal understanding (instead of rejection and loathing) for the world of wrong-headed people who think differently from ourselves. This will be difficult, while we cling to a myth of Truth that is the same for everyone.

The outlines of a new paradigm are beginning to emerge, however; and it is this new, still unfamiliar paradigm of interpretation, conversation and perspectival truth that we are trying to understand. Accordingly, the bulk of this book is a reflection on the consequences for reason when we accept the core of the post-modern position: a) that in cognition we actively appropriate the world, rather than passively receive it; b) that the basic concepts we use in thought and speech are in themselves complex interpretations, supplied to us

ready-made by our culture and language; and c) that, in principle, every individual has a right to his own preferred interpretations (already implicit in the recognized rights of freedom of thought, religion and speech). With these ideas once grasped, there is no way to crawl back under the classical dispensation – much as some might wish. Today the problem is to find a sensible middle path between an irresponsible dogmatism which insists that one’s own beliefs are absolutely true, and an equally irresponsible relativism which insists that any set of beliefs is as good as any other. What we hope from renewed concepts of *reasonableness*, *reasoning* and *reason* is that they help us recognize and tolerate diversity without surrendering our faculties of judgment.

The project here is to sketch terms of reference for a new conception of knowledge and reason that might avail in handling contentious matters. The project seems far from hopeless, because people actually have strong intuitions distinguishing the well-founded from the baseless, the just and intellectually balanced from the merely self-serving. We already have institutions for maintaining peaceful coexistence with people who think differently. These are desperately over-stressed by post-modern conditions, but they are still fairly serviceable when peace suits us better than conflict. It is a matter of dispensing with the paradigm of absolute truth, and taking a fresh look at how we actually do reason about contentious issues when we are trying to be judicious. Such an effort is much more than a theoretical exercise. A more adequate understanding of reason’s nature, limitations, and uses might alleviate the stress on our political institutions, and suggest ways of improving the institutions themselves.

3.4 Summary: Public Truth

As Newtonian physics has been called the physics of medium-sized, slow-moving objects, we might say that classical logic is the logic of clear, uncontroversial cases covered by flat, true-or-false statements. It cannot apply in the absence of consensus on fundamental concepts and assumptions, because without some minimum of agreement neither inductive nor deductive reasoning can get started. Deductive reasoning must begin from commonly accepted concepts and axioms. There is no way to convince people who hold to a certain traditional idea of “marriage” that people of the same sex have a right to enter into legally recognized marriages. No matter how skilfully you argue, there is no reason why they *must* be convinced, and no basis for a claim that they *should* be. Inductive reasoning must begin with stable concepts and operational procedures. You cannot test the hypothesis that “All crows are black” without agreed methods for deciding whether a given thing is a crow and whether it is black. But, even in this predicament, it is not true that reason *per se* is impossible or meaningless. Worthwhile ideas of truth and reason can still

be formed, along a different line: We can understand public truth to be a structure of argument. We can understand reasoned argument to mean a critical confrontation of divergent perceptions, in a spirit of respect and integrity.

It is, of course, a truism that valid knowledge emerges from free debate. That idea is the basis of our adversarial legal system, and our whole tradition of science and scholarship. My point is somewhat different. I am suggesting that argument itself is knowledge, when conducted in a way that makes it so. Public knowledge can be framed in simple propositions only when there is no argument to speak of.

In general, truth is not given us in flat statements of what is the case. On controversial issues, we must learn to see truth in the structure that emerges from well-conducted dispute. The knowledge-value of such a structure – its value as a basis for judgment, decision and further inquiry and argument – will depend on the integrity of the conversation process. Only in situations of consensus, when rival interpretations are not in play, will this structure collapse to flat, assertive statements.

For Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and all their pupils down to the present day, it was an article of faith that processes of inquiry should be expected to converge to some unique, true answer. That they might fail to do so in practice had to be accepted. Human limitations were as well known to the ancients as to us. And the Sophists knew well – and earned their livings teaching – that truth, for practical purposes, is what a clever speaker could make his audience believe. Against these teachers of rhetoric, Socrates insisted that questions did have true and false answers, even when the true answer could not be found. Until the very end of the 19th century, Western thinkers followed Socrates in that belief. The scandal of post-modern thought has been our discovery that for all the humanly significant questions, those that turn on choices of value and interpretation, the Sophists were right all along. At the least, we have to accept that all our most important ideas seem to *become* true or false only as clever rhetoric persuades people to believe them. The key problem of 20th century philosophy has been to see what can be saved from the epistemological debacle that follows.

The idea of truth as a structure of argument might be called *dialecticism* (after the Greek word for argument: *dialektike*), to distinguish it from *consensualism*, on one hand, and from *pragmatism* and *relativism* on the other. For the consensualist, “truth” is “what everyone believes” – a definition that fails when we want to say that someone is more right on some matter than the conventional wisdom to-date. The pragmatist identifies “truth” with practical usefulness – a position that lends itself easily to propaganda and spin-doctoring, and leaves scant basis for consideration of unpleasant or

inconvenient facts. The relativist holds that everyone is entitled to the interpretations that suit him best – a stance that offers no ground for reasoned argument and leads to a form of intellectual solipsism. And then too, there is the correspondence theory, which says that statements are true if they correspond to and articulate reality – but cannot say what reality is, independent of statements used to describe it or the interpretations through which it is perceived.

Against these failed alternatives, one way to save a notion of public truth is to invoke revelation, tradition or some otherwise constituted authority to privilege some particular idea or viewpoint; and there's a lot of this going around. For anyone who sets much value on the idea of reason, a better way is to pin the notion of truth value to qualities of the underlying argument, while acknowledging frankly that this argument may not converge. The point is really very simple: If an argument is conducted with bombs and bullets, or even with TV images and slogans, its knowledge value will be negligible, however completely one side or the other may prevail. On the other hand, if an argument is conducted soberly, with respectful attention to the positions of others, its knowledge value may be very great, even when no definite conclusion or consensus is reached.⁶

⁶ Five varied examples of this kind of knowledge are given in the appendix.