

Truth in history: some conceptions and misconceptions

Jeff Malpas – Tasmania

1. Truth has become, in recent years, a contested concept in almost every area of inquiry. Even within philosophy, a discipline that has traditionally taken truth as its central and guiding, there are those who argue that we are better off leaving truth to one side – focussing perhaps, as Richard Rorty argues, on more important notions such as freedom. Outside of philosophy, talk of truth is often regarded with suspicion, or even derision. Within history, for example, it has become almost commonplace to treat the concept of truth in historical discourse as amounting to little more than a “rhetorical device” that functions to enforce certain relations of power – as Keith Jenkins has it in an oft-quoted passage:

History is a discourse, a language game; within it “truth” and similar expressions are devices to open, regulate and shut down interpretations. Truth acts as a censor – it draws the line. We know that such truths are really “useful fictions” that are in discourse by virtue of power (someone has to put and keep them there) and power uses the term “truth” to exercise control: regimes of truth.¹

Yet the way in which truth appears within historical discussion is also indicative of the way in which the contemporary tendency to deride or abandon any significant notion of truth itself carries with it a certain tension or inconsistency. Questions about historical truth (whether relating to the immediate or the more distant past) have been central to many contemporary public debates – most recently, over the events leading to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. There is, indeed, good reason for viewing truth in history as being an especially important focus for disputes over truth, since not only is history the academic discipline that is perhaps most readily accessible to the general public, and the subject of much popular interest, but it is also in and through history that we come to articulate some of the most important aspects of our individual, as well as collective, identity and self-conception. In this respect, the past, far from being dead and gone, remains of vital interest to us for our present and our future – the past matters to us, and this surely means that the truth about the past matters also. But in that case, how are we to understand the concept of truth that is at issue here? In fact, the problem that truth poses within historical discourse exemplifies, in perhaps more vivid fashion, a problem that seems to lie at the heart of the contemporary disregard for truth in general – on the one hand we are suspicious of truth, and yet on the other hand, we seem unable to do without it.

2. It is perhaps somewhat surprising that within the many contemporary discussions of truth outside of philosophy, whether in history or elsewhere, there are relatively few attempts to provide any detailed analysis or investigation of the concept of truth as such. Those who advance a sceptical approach to truth, writers such as Jenkins, for instance, who argue for the irrelevance or emptiness of truth (what we might refer to as a form of “nihilism” about truth) or else for its relativist or pragmatic determination, seldom look too closely into the way in which truth actually operates. The same is often true of those within philosophy who argue from a broadly post-modernist perspective for the irrelevance or relativity of truth. Rather than base the claim on any analysis of truth as such, the tendency is rather to emphasise the fallibility of claims to truth, and the rhetorical and political uses to which truth is put. The typical conclusion is that for the most part truth cannot be distinguished from belief or opinion – or, perhaps, from fiction – the only addition that the concept of truth makes is indeed a rhetorical or political one. Within history, even the defenders of truth tend not to attempt any examination of truth (C. Behan McCullagh’s Truth in History is a partial, but solitary, exception), but instead focus on actual historical practice, and the way evidential and justificatory claims operate within such practice.² This strategy, however, is one that effectively gives up on any attempt to defend the notion of truth as such, instead falling back on the defence merely of a practice of truth seeking (in many ways the strategy is similar to the Popperian attempt to replace truth with the notion of verisimilitude).³

It is, of course, important that we recognise the way in which truth is indeed already implicated in historical discourse, as it is implicated in all discourse, and it is a point to which I shall return, since it can be seen to underlie the tension that I noted at the beginning of this discussion between the suspicion of truth in history and the continuing significance of truth. Yet notwithstanding its importance, nor the fact that the point also figures in many philosophical defences of truth (and not only those of historians), it is worth noting the limitations inherent in any account that looks to defend truth by looking to practice alone, rather than to the conceptual framework that supports that practice. The appeal to practice leave open the sceptical rejoinder that no matter how embedded truth may be in what we do, and no matter how developed may be our practices for justification and evidential evaluation, these still remain ways for deciding about what we are to take as true, not practices that provide access to truth as such.

Truth does indeed remain embedded in all our discourse and all our investigative practice, but this fact constitutes both the strength and the weakness of any practice-based defence of truth. Those who are sceptical in their attitude to truth, whether nihilist, relativist or pragmatist, can admit that some idea of truth is a necessary part of the practice of, for instance, historical writing and research, and yet still insist that the idea of truth that is involved is constituted purely in terms of its role in the operation of certain discursive and

rhetorical formations, and in certain relations of power. This will apply, not only to truth, moreover, but to all the other concepts with which truth is connected – concepts of evidence, justification, reliability and so forth⁴ – such that there can be no independent source to appeal to that lies outside of the formations of discourse, rhetoric and power. Indeed, since any form of truth-seeking practice, whether historical, scientific or whatever, is, on such a view, constituted in just these terms, so the appeal to that practice cannot serve to provide any counter to claims regarding the discursive, rhetorical or political “construction” of truth. It may thus be admitted that historical discourse, for instance, is predicated on the idea that one can distinguish between descriptions, explanations and interpretations that are more or less adequate, more or less accurate, and that such notions of adequacy or accuracy implicitly draw in some way or another on the notion of truth, and yet it might still be pointed out that all that is actually needed here is just that notion, not its realisation – that truth plays a role in some discourse need not imply that we have actually access to any truths.

On this basis, one can hold to the fact that truth is central to discourse, and yet, at the meta-theoretical level, take the only viable account of truth to be a relativist, pragmatist or even verificationist one. In fact, it seems that many defences of truth in history turn out to be indistinguishable from those positions that mount an attack on truth, since the defence very often comes to rely on asserting the centrality of the concept of truth, while nevertheless accepting truth’s inaccessibility, and instead relying on some surrogate notion, such as reliability or verisimilitude, or an alternative conception of truth, that is based in the contingent norms and conventions of historical practice thereby leading to what is essentially a form of relativism or pragmatism.⁵

Yet there remains a problem for any position that treats truth in a way that reduces it, whether practically or theoretically, to any other notion – inasmuch as such positions make a claim about truth, they also make a claim to truth. Thus, in terms of the passage from Jenkins quoted above, we can legitimately ask whether the claim that Jenkins makes there, the claim that truths are nothing more than “useful fictions”, is itself true. Of course, in the case of Jenkins’ claim a problem immediately emerges, since if Jenkins claim that truths are nothing more than useful fictions is itself true, then that claim must itself be nothing more than a useful fiction, but in that case one might reasonably argue that the claim is not true. Jenkins’ claim actually turns out to contain a relative of the so-called “liar paradox”: If I say to you, “I am a liar. Everything I say is false,” and what I say is true, then what I have said must be false. The liar paradox indicates the difficulty in making any claim about truth that also involves any unqualified denial of truth. The paradox arises because of the special role played by truth in relation to sentences. It is characteristic of any declarative sentence that we can ask whether that sentence is true, and any declarative sentence makes a claim to truth. This is not some accidental feature of declarative sentences – sentences are declarative inasmuch as they

assert something to be true: “It is raining”, “The hedge needs pruning”, “Yesterday the Government was re-elected”. Moreover, even interrogatives stand in an essential relation to truth since they require a declarative response, while if performatives (promises, commands, and so forth) do not assert any truths, they also depend upon the truth of certain declaratives, and may be taken to imply certain declaratives (“I promise to meet you tomorrow” could thus be taken as descriptive of my making a certain commitment), while some performatives (imperatives or commands) can be construed as attempts to make certain sentences true (“Shut the door!” thus means “Make it that the door be shut!”).

Recognition of the role that truth plays here is indicative of the indispensability of truth in all discourse in a way that goes beyond its implication in practices of justification or evidential evaluation. The problem that arises when one attempts to formulate any unqualified statement that would reduce truth to something else – to belief, opinion or even fiction – arises because of this special and indispensable relationship between truth and sentences. It is no help to reiterate the point made earlier to the effect that the concept of truth at work in these cases is already a concept that stands within a relation of discourse, rhetoric or power, since the problem is that the attempt to make such an assertion itself seems to constitute an attempt to stand outside of just that relationship. The claim that truth is “nothing but” a rhetorical or discursive device, or an instrument for the maintenance of certain power relations, is essentially a meta-theoretical claim that takes, for instance, the structure of discourse, or the operation of rhetoric or power, as its object, and to make a claim about it. To do so, however, it must also present itself as in some way standing apart from its object, even while it also denies that such a stance apart is possible.⁶ Here much the same tension that appeared in the discussion at the very start of my discussion here emerges once again – the tension between suspicion of truth, or its outright denial, and the continuing commitment to truth through the commitment to the notion that there is indeed something at issue, something that matters.

It is important to recognise the fact of this tension and also to recognise the discomfort that it brings with it. It is not a tension that can be sustained, but the danger is that will constantly leave us oscillating between the extremes of some form of dogmatic “realism”; about truth (without being able properly to clarify such realism), and the scepticism that denies or relativises truth. Both extremes are untenable, of course, since they are what actually give rise to the instability here in the first place. Recognition of fallibility and error lead us to abandon standard realist conceptions of truth, while recognition of the necessity of truth as distinct from what is held true forces us away from any denial or relativisation of truth. Both these movements can be seen in the contemporary discussion of truth in history, and each draw on aspects of actual historical practice, as well as the results of historical research, to support their positions. Yet no amount of exploration of historical practice can

provide a solution here, since what is at issue is not how historians actually practice history (which is not to deny that such a study can be a legitimate subject of meta-historical inquiry), but rather how we should understand the concepts that underlie that practice, that direct and govern it, and, in particular, how we should understand the concept of truth that is already embedded in historical discourse, as it is embedded in all discourse.

3. The only way to resolve the tension that bedevils the discussion of truth, whether in history or elsewhere, is to re-think what is involved in our understanding of truth, and, more specifically, to rethink some of the standard misconceptions concerning truth that give rise to the tension identified above. There are at least three misconceptions that are critical here: the first is that truth can indeed be given some characterisation in terms that do not already rely upon the concept of truth; the second is that truth is always complete or impartial; the third is that truth inheres in some body of determinate and enumerable “propositions”, and that we can therefore talk of “the truth” as if it were something eternal and unchanging. Let me deal with each of these in turn.

We have already seen how any attempt to deny truth, in an unqualified way, gives rise to difficulties. The problem is that in order to deny truth one also draws upon the very concept of truth, since the denial involves a claim to truth, and this reflects the way in which truth is already implicated (either directly or indirectly) in any and every discursive act, in any and every sentence, statement or utterance. One way in which this point can be expressed is to say that every sentence either has a truth-value (it is either true or false) or else (in the case, perhaps, of non-assertoric utterances) stands in relation to another sentence that does, but the point can also be more put generally in terms of the way in which the concept of is necessarily presupposed by the very possibility of meaningful discourse as such.

One of the ways in which this “presuppositional” aspect of truth is apparent is in the impossibility of providing any complete characterisation of truth in terms that do not themselves rely on the concept of truth. This is a problem for all of the traditional accounts of truth whether as correspondence (or “correlation”), coherence, consensus, or whatever. One can, of course, ask of any such account whether it is true, and so a prior grasp of truth must already be assumed,⁷ but, perhaps more importantly, not every instance of correspondence, coherence, consensus, or whatever other concept is at issue, will be an instance of truth. To take a simple example, the sentence “Truth has become a contested concept in almost every area of inquiry” corresponds to (correlates with) the sentence that appears at the start of this essay, and yet the relation between these two sentences is not one of truth or truth-making. One can object that this is not the sense of correspondence that is at issue in talk of truth, but then the question is just what sense of correspondence is at issue, and correspondence in what respects? Truth is not simply identical with correspondence, nor, indeed, with any other

concept other than itself. As a result, any attempt to specify truth in ways that do not already involve the concept will always be inadequate. Why should this be so? Simply because of the foundational role that truth plays in all meaning, all discourse, all understanding.

Truth is not correspondence or coherence or any of the other standard candidates. Truth is a matter of being true, and being true is just a matter of things being as they appear or are presented as being, and that they can be so is a fundamental condition even of being able to question truth as such. One might say, as a result, that to presuppose truth is to presuppose that we have access to the world. The oddity about this, however, is that truth is not a presupposition that can sensibly be put in question. To suppose that we do not have access to the world, which is equivalent to the sceptical notion that perhaps what we hold to be true is for the most part false, is to threaten all of our utterances, all of our discourse, with meaninglessness. Suppose that most of what we hold true was indeed false, then not only would we be unable to distinguish between the true and the false, but neither would we be able reliably to attribute meaning to what we say, since meaning is itself dependent on truth.⁸

This latter point is evident as soon as we reflect on what happens when we confront someone whose utterances fail to connect with anything that we ourselves hold true – too much error undermines sense, and so the one who utters only falsities, or whose utterances lack consistency, is someone whose utterances are likely to be written off as mere ravings. This is not only a point to be derived from Davidsonian or Wittgensteinian reflections on the nature of language and understanding, but is also apparent from a consideration of the nature of hermeneutic engagement as articulated in the work of such as Heidegger and Gadamer. Language is conversation, says Gadamer, yet such conversation requires not only a conversational partner, but also something with respect to which the conversation is about (*eine Sache*), and to which the conversation can be addressed.⁹ But that means that language, and so all discourse or understanding, itself depends on our having access to that about which we speak – in the final analysis, language is thus dependent on our access to the world, just as our access to the world is also dependent on language.¹⁰

It is difficult to provide any better characterisation of truth than is to be found in Aristotle: “To say that what is is not, or that what is not, is, is false; but to say that what is is, and what is not is not, is true; and therefore also he who says that a thing is or is not will say either what is true or what is false.”¹¹ For a sentence to be true, then, is simply for it to present the world in the way the world is. This is not to say that things cannot also sometimes appear or be presented as they are not, and, indeed, this is what Aristotle refers to as falsity, but this does not undermine the possibility of truth itself. Moreover, it does not add anything here to say that this account of truth does not address the question of our access to truth – of how it is that we can ascertain whether things are as they appear or are presented. How does one see whether something is as it appears? This question is nothing more than the question: “how

does one know whether something is true?" But no matter what we may say in terms, for instance, of evidential warrant or procedures of justification, such notions can never guarantee truth, and neither is truth equivalent to being warranted or justified any more than it is identical with correspondence or coherence. This is one of the reasons why, as we have already seen, no amount of investigation into the evidential or justificatory practices in historical writing and research can serve to defend the idea of historical truth as something other than a "useful fiction", an unattainable ideal, a rhetorical device, or an instrument of power.

Truth cannot be elucidated other than in its own terms, and so truth can never be reduced to anything other than being true. This was, however, only the first of three misconceptions that I identified as underlying contemporary suspicion of truth. The second consisted in the idea that truth must always be complete and "impartial". Thus one of the objections to the idea of truth is that, contrary to the way in which truth represents itself, any claim to truth can only ever present a partial aspect of things, in terms that are often derived from Nietzsche, any claim to truth is seen to be only one perspective among many possible perspectives. Yet although we often forget the partiality of truth, and indeed, may even be prone to insist on certain truths as if they were not partial in this way, there is nothing in the concept of truth as such that ties it to such a conception. In fact, if we consider the nature of truth, then it should be obvious that truth, in an important sense, is indeed always "partial", and always incomplete.

Inasmuch as truth is a property of sentences, and since no sentence, or body of sentences, ever says all that can be said about its object, so there is always more to truth than can be given in any single instance of truth, and no finite set of truths ever comprises the whole truth about that of which it speaks. A sentence makes a certain claim, and, as such, it already picks out a certain aspect of things. In this respect, every sentence already implies a certain particular stance towards the world that is distinct from other stances. Indeed, that a sentence can state anything at all depends on its taking just such a stand – on making a certain claim – and its truth or falsity is itself directly related to the claim that it makes. It is thus no objection to the possibility of truth to insist that truth is never complete, since truth is not a matter of completeness. To reiterate the Aristotelian definition advanced above, truth is a matter of things being as they are or being presented as they are – "of saying of what is that it is and of what is not that is not". That every truth is "partial" and incomplete is true, but it is also truistic. Every sentence states something, but for that very reason no sentence can state everything; every true sentence states some particular truth, but for that reason no true sentence can encompass all such truths.

The necessary incompleteness of truth does not mean that truth cannot be used in ways that distort or deceive. In fact, it is precisely through failing to attend to the specificity

of truth claims, or by presenting such claims in ways that ignore or obscure that specificity, that distortion and deception occurs. Yet this is not a defect or drawback in the character of truth, so much as a feature of the human reception of truth – a feature of what we do with truth, and how we use it. Once again, of course, that truth can be used in this way, and that it is so used, serves to reinforce the rhetorical and political significance of truth, but it does not legitimate the reduction of truth to merely a rhetorical, ideological or political construct.

The third, and last, misconception that I indicated above was the notion that truth is somehow eternal and unchanging. This is a particularly deep-seated view, but it is also one of the most problematic and misleading – moreover, it involves a misconception, not only about the nature of truth, but also about meaning. Truth and meaning are, as we saw earlier, closely connected – the possibility of meaning is dependent on the possibility of truth – but the point of connection that is relevant here concerns the way in which the truth of sentences depends on the meanings of those sentences – on what those sentences say.¹² Alternatively, since one might say that the identity of a sentence is just a matter of what the sentence says, then one might also say that the truth of a sentence is directly dependent on the identity of the sentence (although this characterisation does require some sensitivity to the complications that surround the concept of meaning).¹³ With respect to any natural language, there is no limit to the number of different sentences that may be generated within it; and since truth is a property of sentences, then, with respect to any natural language, neither is there any limit to the number of true sentences of that language (this is another reason, in fact, why truth cannot be viewed as entailing completeness – no matter what has already been said, there are always more truths that can be spoken). In addition, however, we also have to recognise that, without language, there are no sentences, but without sentences, there are no truths. In that case, it makes no sense at all to talk of truth as if it referred to some body of statements that remained true for all time – neither languages nor sentences have the sort of “immortality” that would be required for this to be so.

This does not mean, however, that truth is somehow fickle and uncertain. Once we have identified a sentence in terms of what that sentence means, or what it says, then, in most cases, its truth value is also fixed (the exceptions are those possible cases in which the meaning concerns some aspect of the world that is itself dependent on the sentence or on something related to the sentence¹⁴). Moreover, if one treats the proper bearers of truth to be sentences as uttered, then the meaning of the sentence will also be indexed to a certain time and place (the time and place of utterance), so that we may treat sentences as having a truth value that is fixed as soon as the meaning of the sentence is fixed even in the case of sentences that may refer to what is historically contingent.

The concept of truth does not refer, then, to some body of eternal “truths”. Indeed, leaving the notion of truth to one side, there is no way to identify any body of statements that

could be potential candidates for such truths. Sentences, and utterances, are historical entities, they have a life that is dependent on specific circumstances of culture, language and social context. The idea of the proposition, which might otherwise be thought of as the eternal bearer of truth or falsity, is a purely abstract and technical concept that has meaning only in its employment within specific linguistic and meta-linguistic contexts. There are no propositions independently of sentences and languages. If this is taken to be the assertion of a form of anti-Platonism (and in one sense it certainly is), then that may be taken to indicate the extent to which much of the contemporary suspicion of truth, including that of many so-called “post-modern” thinkers, is itself dependent on taking a certain Platonic conception of truth, and the world, as its starting point. There seems no reason, however (other than an historical one, and even that is not obvious) why such a starting point should be forced upon us.

4. If truth is a contested notion, then the very fact of such contestation itself testifies to truth’s indispensability and significance. Indeed, as Bernard Williams points out, the contemporary suspicion of truth is itself based on our continuing concern for and commitment to the truth.¹⁵ This is especially so in historical discourse, since the truth about our past is so vitally connected with the truth about our present and our future. It is no surprise, then, that history should have been such a key battlefield in the contemporary “war” over truth.

Yet much of the dispute regarding truth, whether in history or elsewhere, is itself driven by a set of problematic and often poorly grounded assumptions, assumptions that derive from a failure adequately to address the question concerning the nature of truth as such. Within history, this has often been exacerbated by a tendency on the part of historians and theorists of history to focus on the practices of historical research and writing, of evidential support and justificatory process. This is so both for those who would defend historical truth as a significant and contentful notion, as well as those who would attack it. Yet the very nature of truth means that it can never adequately be elucidated in terms of other concepts or practices – the very attempt to do so will always founder on the gap that exists between truth and justification, between truth and correspondence, truth and coherence, truth and belief. This means that, on the one hand, the attempt to legitimate truth by appeal to something other than truth itself (by appeal, for instance, to some notion of critical engagement or evaluation) will be vulnerable to the charge that this is not truth, or, at least, that it is not what truth purports to be, while, on the other hand, the attempt to deny truth as having any content that goes beyond what is taken or presented as true (to deny that truth is more, for instance, than an ideological construct or rhetorical device) must still implicitly presuppose, contrary to its own insistence otherwise, on some notion of truth that is more than this.

The solution, as I have argued here, is to re-think the misconceptions concerning truth that give rise to this impasse. Rethinking those assumptions means rethinking the idea that truth can be given any adequate account in terms that do not already presuppose the concept itself; rethinking the all-too prevalent assumption that truth is always complete and impartial; rethinking the "Platonic" commitment to the eternity of truth or to truth as consisting in some body of certain and unchanging propositions. Rather than looking to define truth in terms other than itself, or looking to identify procedures that will enable us to pick out those impossible sentences which will remain true forever, we need to recognise truth as consisting in the ever-present accessibility of the world as articulated in and through our linguistic engagement with the world – as appearing in the constant adjustment of belief in response to the ongoing encounter with ourselves, with others, and with the things around us. Truth, then, does not name some arcane relation to what lies beyond us; instead it refers to the way we are always already in the world, to the way in which the world is always already opened to us.

Notes and references

¹ Keith Jenkins, Re-Thinking History (London: Routledge, 1991), p.32.

² This seems characteristic, in fact, of most of the defences of truth in history that have been advanced over recent years where the focus is often on defending historical truth by exhibiting the nature of evidential and justificatory practice as operative in specific instances of historical research, or else, by showing how the rejection of historical truth is based on misunderstanding or misrepresentation of those practices – see, for instance, Richard J. Evans, In Defence of History (London: Granta, 1997), see also Behan McCullagh, and Courthoys and Docker, cited below.

³ This latter approach certainly seems to be the one adopted by Ann Courthoys and John Docker. Their answer to the question posed in the title of their book – ‘is history fiction?’ – is that history is not fiction, and that it cannot be, primarily because of the way history remains tied to an interest in truth (see Ann Courthoys and John Docker, Is history fiction? Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2005, p. 5). The argument advanced by Courthoys and Docker does not depend on any analysis of truth, and, indeed, as this passage indicates, they reject the possibility of arriving at objective truths about the past, but instead they focus on an analysis of historical practice, on the commitment to truth that appears to drive such practice, and on the nature of the practice as such. Similarly Behan McCullagh, although providing more in the way of a direct analysis of truth, rests his argument not so much on that analysis (he rejects the standard accounts of truth as inadequate), as on an investigation of the possibility of objectivity in historical description, explanation, and interpretation that looks to establish the reliability of historical practice – a reliability often best explained by the assumption that the explanations and interpretations at issue are indeed true – and takes objectivity in historical research to rest on the ability to evaluate different explanations or interpretations according to commonly accepted criteria – see Behan McCullagh’s concluding comments in The Truth in History (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 307-309; see also his discussion of truth, pp. 13-61.

⁴ It will also apply to notions of, for instance, verisimilitude – notions that might otherwise be thought to offer an alternative to talk of truth. The notion of “likeness to truth”, however, fares no better in allowing us to avoid the “sceptical” challenge that is at issue here, than does the appeal to notions of justification, evidence and so forth (notions with which the idea of verisimilitude is, in any case, usually closely tied). The point is that the entire constellation of concepts that cluster around truth are as just as vulnerable to the claim that they are rhetorically or politically constituted as is truth itself.

⁵ Although their own position on the matter is not entirely clear, this seems to be close to the position implicit in Courthoys and Docker’s account, as well as in that of Behan McCullagh. Behan McCullagh presents a more complex case than that of Courthoys and Docker, but it is still hard to see how Behan McCullagh’s position can treat truth as it is actually operative in historical practice to be other than conventionally or normatively determined.

⁶ It is worth noting that Alfred Tarski attempted to avoid the paradoxes that come with the self-referential employment of the truth-predicate (uses such as are exemplified by the liar paradox) within formal languages, by employing a hierarchy of truth predicates that prevent any self-referential use of truth. See Tarski, “The Concept of Truth in Formalized Languages”, in Tarski, Logic, Semantics and Metamathematics, edited by J.H. Woodger (Oxford University Press, 1956).

⁷ Any attempt to inquire into the nature of some concept must always, of course, presuppose some preliminary grasp of the concept at issue. So if we ask, for instance, “what is justice?”, then we must already have some idea of what justice is otherwise our questioning could not even begin. What is at issue in respect of truth, however, is not merely that some grasp of truth is necessary to guide the inquiry into truth, but rather that any statement that addresses the terms of that inquiry or that purports to provide an answer must itself draw directly upon the concept in question in virtue of being a statement. Thus one can say that “justice is fairness” without the statement itself being reliant on the concept of justice that it purports to explicate – “justice is fairness” does not, in virtue just of being a statement (as opposed to a statement about justice), draw upon the concept of justice; one cannot say that “truth is correspondence”, however, without drawing upon the notion of truth in the very statement as such.

⁸ The argument advanced here, both in relation to the indefinability of truth and the foundational role it plays in language and understanding, is essentially the same as that developed by Donald Davidson in various works over the last forty years – see Davidson, Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2nd edn, 2001) and Truth, Language and History (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005).

⁹ See my “Sprache ist Gespräch: On Gadamer, Language and Philosophy”, in Andre Wiercinski (ed.), Between Description and Interpretation, forthcoming 2005.

¹⁰ The tendency to view language as somehow constituting a barrier between ourselves and the world, a tendency common among to whole range of sceptical, relativist and pragmatist positions, is itself closely associated with the misconceptions about truth that are the focus for the discussion here. For more on the role of language in this regard see my “Sprache ist Gespräch: On Gadamer, Language and Philosophy”, and also Davidson, “Seeing Through Language”, in Truth, Language and History, pp. 127-42. It might be thought that in insisting on the necessary presupposition of our “access” to the world, I am here relying on a “naïve” realism that takes no account of what we know about the complex structure of our perceptual and cognitive relationship to our environment. C. Behan McCullagh makes just such an objection to the Heideggerian conception of truth as “disclosedness” (a conception that certainly stands in the background of my discussion here) in The Truth in History, pp. 50-53. For the most part, however, the causal processes on which knowledge and experience supervene have little bearing on the content of knowledge and experience, and is not relevant, in any general way, to questions concerning the truth of our beliefs. This is an issue I have discussed, although from a Davidsonian perspective, in “On Not Giving Up the World: Davidson on the Grounds of Belief”, published as “Não renunciar ao mundo: Davidson e os fundamentos da crença”, in Waldomiro José da Silva

(ed), Davidson e a Filosofia (Rio de Janeiro: D. P. & A. Editora and Arcadia Editora, 2005) and also in my "Self-knowledge and Scepticism", Erkenntnis 40 (1994), pp. 165-184.

¹¹ Aristotle, Metaphysics, 1011b1.

¹² The truth value of a sentence is dependent on only one thing in addition to its meaning, namely, the world.

¹³ To treat sentences as individuated by their meanings, one has to treat what the sentence says as tied to its particular syntactic, as well as semantic, structure (and thereby, perhaps, to have a broader sense of the semantic as itself partly dependent on the syntactic), since otherwise one would be committed to saying that "it is raining" and "now it rains" are instances of the same sentence (when they are syntactically distinct). One might object to the idea that these sentences must have different meanings in virtue of being different sentences, but that would be to require a much more precise and clearer conception of what "sameness of meaning" might be that is, I think, justified. What counts as "sameness of meaning" is always dependent on the particular context in which such sameness come to be at issue.

¹⁴ One could view instances of the liar paradox as providing an example of this - one may fix the meaning of the sentence "this sentence is false" and yet the truth value of the sentence remains ambiguous. This presupposes, however, that one can fix the meaning in this case, and the objection may be made that the sentence is not, in fact, meaningful at all, and even that it fails to constitute a proper sentence.

¹⁵ See Bernard Williams, Truth and Truthfulness (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 1-2.