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## TRUTH AS A WAY OF LIFE

BY COREY BEALS

At the Quaker Theological Discussion Group meetings in Denver,<sup>1</sup> we had a lively discussion that arose out of my review of Rosemary Moore's book, *The Light in Their Consciences: The Early Quakers in Britain, 1646-1666*. In that review, I observed that her historical methodology presupposed that no testimony of encounters with the divine could be included as authentic in her explanatory accounts. So any such testimony, according to her methodology, must be explained in terms of some sort of deception, including the possibility of self-deception. Further, her methodology presupposed that teleology<sup>2</sup> had no explanatory role to play when providing historical description. In a written response to this criticism, Moore replied, "I was attempting to write a book that would be acceptable in academic circles, and it is a fact—unfortunate if you like—that God has to be left out of academic discourse, and that teleology is almost equally unacceptable."<sup>3</sup>

Moore's appeal to the *fact* of the exclusion of God and teleology from academic circles does not, however, answer the criticism but merely shifts the criticism to those standards. If God and teleology must be "left out of academic discourse" as she suggests, then such a move makes the criticism apply more broadly. *Why* must God and teleology be left out of academic discourse? I argued in the review<sup>4</sup> that the long-held presupposition that "talk about God was biased" was itself a presupposition *with* a bias. To assume that "a secular worldview is neutral" is itself a biased assumption which is not neutral. This assumption was, in part, a result of having a narrow, reductionistic view of truth.

Many partaking in the discussion in Denver were intrigued by this argument, but asked, "What alternative is available?" Since we ran out of time, and since this was a question that required more attention, I was asked to address the topic in a subsequent session. What follows is my response to that request.

While many theories of truth have been suggested over the last two hundred years, none of them has proven to be widely satisfactory. Advances in science and technology have modified understandings of some aspects of truth, but the larger questions still remain to be addressed. Instead of rushing to give an alternative answer to the ques-

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tion, “What is truth?” time deserves to be spent looking at what is wrong with the question itself. In looking at differing philosophical views of truth that have been historically significant, most have suffered from a similar flaw—a flaw that could be traced to the way the question was being asked. Before turning to an analysis of the question, however, I will begin by looking briefly at the prevalent answers that have received the most attention.

## WHAT IS TRUTH?

There is much that could be said in reviewing the answers given to the question of truth. Many books are dedicated to the subject, and I obviously cannot hope to do justice to the varieties and subtleties of each of the theories of truth.<sup>5</sup> In mentioning the major views, I want to focus on two factors of each theory. First, I will ask what each theory says is the ‘truth-bearer.’ The *truth-bearer* is that about which we say something is true. The main candidates for truth-bearers are sentences, statements (assertions), beliefs (judgments) and propositions.<sup>6</sup> Second, I will ask what the theory identifies as the ‘truth-maker.’ The *truth-maker* is that which makes the truth-bearer true.

**a. Correspondence Theories of Truth.** Historically, the most widespread theory of truth has been the *correspondence* theory of truth, which simply put, is to say that truth is the correspondence between a proposition and reality. This is the view that was held by Aristotle, who famously defined truth saying that “To say of what is that it is and of what is not that it is not, is true.”<sup>7</sup> Many others have held this view, including Aquinas, who defined truth saying, “truth is the adequation of reality and the intellect.”<sup>8</sup> That is, truth is when thought *equals*, or corresponds to, reality. In each case, the truth-maker is reality. If the truth-bearer conforms to reality, then it is true; if not, then it is false. This correspondence could work in multiple ways, and there are many varieties of correspondence theories, some which make sentences or statements as the truth-bearer and others that make propositions as the truth-bearer. Many of the medieval philosopher/theologians allowed for many possible truth-bearers and did not require that we choose just one type of truth-bearer. Aquinas even held that things could be truth-bearers. So there was a wide understanding of what could count as a truth-bearer.

In the 17th century, however, the ‘principle of parsimony,’ otherwise known as ‘Ockham’s razor,’ came to be the intellectual tool of choice. This principle of parsimony takes various forms, but is popularly defined

as the counsel that says, “Do not multiply explanations unnecessarily.” The effect of this drive to eliminate any apparently unnecessary explanation had a significant impact upon theories of truth. Seeking monological explanations led to various reductive accounts of truth-bearers, saying that only sentences are truth-bearers, or that only statements or beliefs were truth-bearers. Regardless of what a theory said about the truth-bearer, it usually was in response to the question, “what is *the* truth-bearer?” and it usually provided just one answer. Since the assumption was that the simplest answer was the best, this led correspondence theorists and most others to posit just one truth-bearer.

**b. Coherence Theories of Truth.** Another type of theory is known as the *coherence* theory of truth. Coherence theories of truth identify a person’s beliefs as the truth-bearers. This was in no small part driven by challenges of skepticism and the of lack confidence it brought in our ability to know facts about reality external to us. But since beliefs were something with which we could have direct contact, beliefs became the only candidates for what we could know. If we can only have sure access to our own beliefs, then what is it that could be the truth-maker? Coherentists have suggested that what made particular beliefs true was a belief’s lack of contradiction with other beliefs. According to coherentism, if a belief is consistent—or *coherent*—with all other beliefs, then it is true. There are many difficulties with such a view, however. One problem is that coherentism is concerned with avoiding contradiction within a particular subject’s set of beliefs, so a particular belief could be consistent with one person’s belief system but contrary to another person’s belief system. This view makes the truth of any belief almost entirely particular to the perspective of the person holding that belief, forcing one toward relativism.<sup>9</sup>

Another obvious problem with this is that most can think of coherent belief systems which though internally consistent, are wrong. Nihilism is a very coherent belief system, for example, but many are hesitant to say that the belief that “it is good to eliminate weak people” is true for the person holding it simply because it is consistent with his nihilist belief system. One’s views can thus be entirely coherent, but at the same time flawed, and even wrong.

**c. Pragmatic Theories of Truth.** Reacting against the coherentists’ claim that consistency with one’s belief system is the truth-maker, the pragmatist theorists of truth show that coherentism allows for foolish (or useless) consistencies. Pragmatists seek to find a theory of truth that makes truth useful for life. One type of pragmatism, *instrumentalist pragmatism*, locates truth in the ability of a proposition to bring about successful results. This utilitarian view of truth does not see successful

results as a sign of truth but identifies the success it brings about as that which makes it true.

William James, in defining truth, said that “the possession of true thoughts means everywhere the possession of invaluable instruments of action” (p. 78), and his view of truth can be summarized by saying that a belief is true if and only if it is useful to believe it. Thus, beliefs are usually taken to be the truth-bearers, and the truth-maker is the success that the belief causes for the one who holds that belief. While there are several historical and contemporary versions of pragmatism, and much could be said about these various views, one obvious flaw with these views is that they make truth highly relative to the person holding the beliefs, since in order to determine the truth of a belief one must first find out for *whom* the belief is useful. Also, it is not enough to ask whether the belief is useful; one must also ask, “useful for what purpose?” Clearly, identical beliefs could be useful for one purpose but not for another purpose, making truth contingent upon what purpose is intended. Further, even if the same purpose is agreed upon, a particular belief could be useful for one person while simultaneously lacking usefulness for another.

**d. Deflationary Theories of Truth.** A group of theories has emerged lately which treat the topic of truth, but unlike the theories above, these do not hold truth to be a substantive property. These views are called deflationary theories of truth, and they deny that talk about truth has the significance usually attributed to it; they therefore attempt to *deflate* the notion of truth altogether. Deflationary theorists are not trying to identify what it is that makes a sentence true, so much as they are trying to describe what makes people speak of truth in such grand ways when ‘truth’ is an empty property. Deflationists argue that people falsely think they are saying something substantive when they say something is ‘true.’ One way that deflationists explain such statements is to say truth statements merely add a redundancy into our language. According to some deflationary views, to say “*it is true that* there is a cat on the mat” is no different than saying “there is a cat on the mat.” These views deny that the many ways we speak of truth actually add meaning to what we are saying, and it is for this reason that they are called ‘deflationary’ accounts of truth. Since these accounts usually give explanations of ‘truth’ in terms of linguistic functions, the ‘truth-bearers’ are usually sentences. What is unique about these accounts, though, is that because they are not saying that truth is a substantive property, there *is no ‘truth-maker’* in the sense that other theories of truth propose a truth-maker.

A significant problem with these views is that they contradict what humans have experienced and communicated throughout history. A

deflationary theorist would think that any talk of truth as a significant property is a mere deception and little more than a linguistic function like a repeated sentence. In that sense, such a theorist is deconstructive of all claims to truth, even authentic ones.

**e. Constructivist Theories of Truth.** In contrast to deflationary views of truth which contradict and downplay human experience, some theorists, which I will refer to broadly as *constructivists*, insist on the centrality and validity of human experience. The constructivist's apparent respect for the human experience of truth is seen by the fact that they view truth as a human creation. There are many different versions of constructivism, but what they all share in common is that they view truth as a human creation or construct. Various views ascribe different truth-bearers, but a common candidate is the sentence. The truth-maker in some cases is the individual, but more frequently truth is said to be a social construction. For some, like Ernest Becker, humans find freedom in their ability to create truth, and in their ability to realize that truth is their own creation. "The most astonishing thing of all, about man's fictions, is not that they have from prehistoric times hung like a flimsy canopy over his social world, but that he should have come to discover them at all."<sup>10</sup> The great achievement that the constructivist claims is not only that truth is constructed by humans, but that we are *aware* of this fact.

For other constructivists, like Michel Foucault,<sup>11</sup> truth is constructed as a strategy for exercising power over others. While some locate this truth-creating capacity within the individual, many others attribute this construction to social groups.<sup>12</sup> Pointing to the fact that a consensus (of rational adults with sufficient experience to make judgments) is the truth-maker, Richard Rorty has notoriously commented that truth is "what your peers will let you get away with saying." Quakers might be tempted to embrace this view, since it appears to be upholding consensus as the ideal. But we should be cautioned that this is not just saying that consensus is a way of testing or confirming truth—this view says that truth is *determined* by what is agreed upon.

Rorty also says that "Truth cannot be out there—cannot exist independently of the human mind—because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there. The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false."<sup>13</sup> Here we can see that truth-bearers for Rorty are limited to descriptions of the world—sentences, and it is not the reality of the world that makes the sentences true or false. According to the constructivist, it is we humans who make some sentence true or false.

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Variations of the constructivist views of truth are given by various postmodern accounts of truth; some are aimed directly against science, suggesting that even the claims of science are nothing but the result of cultural construction. Of course one problem that such a view faces is the scenario in which the majority is wrong. As Doug Gwyn has said, “truth is *not* determined by majority vote.”

### CORRECT AND CORRECTED

For each of the theories above, I have only briefly mentioned some of the most intuitively obvious problems, but each one is saddled with many deep and intractable philosophical problems as well that have been much discussed in the literature. Each of the views has its adherents because each of them has some ring of truth about them, but I find none of them to be fully satisfactory. Some views, such as the deflationary theories popular among analytical philosophers today, deny that I can be correct about my experiences of truth and even suggest that my desire for truth is misguided. Quakers, however, have held that we do have some access to truth. The testimony to inward light affirms this.

As a reaction to many of these theories which deny the validity of human experience of truth, theories such as coherence, pragmatism and constructivism suggest that the truth is created by me—either by my system of beliefs, my pragmatic purposes, or my act of constructing meaning. These theories do what the other theories did not do—they respect the validity of human experience. However, they do so to such a degree that they do not allow me to be accountable to truth outside of myself. As unpleasant as it may be, I know that I need to be challenged and corrected. It is important to acknowledge that I have access to truth—that I can see truth. But inward light does not mean complete light. We see through a glass, but nonetheless we see through a glass darkly. Thus, if I am the creator of truth, this denies what I intuitively, historically, and biblically know to be true—that I can be wrong.

Furthermore, a world in which I construct the truth is a lonely world. As poet Richard Wilbur wrote in the poem called “On Having Misidentified a Wildflower,” “A thrush because I’d been wrong, /Burst rightly into song/In a world not vague, not lonely, /Not governed by me only.”<sup>14</sup>

I thus came to a deep dissatisfaction with the theories of truth currently on offer. I longed to have a world in which I could be wrong, but each of the views that allowed me to be corrected denied that I could be

correct about even some of my experience of truth. Likewise, the views that allowed me to be correct about my experiences denied me the ability to be truly corrected. Thus I found that none of these views of truth spoke to my condition.

## WAYS WE COMMONLY SPEAK FOR TRUTH

Before turning to the evaluation of these various theories of truth, I want to pause to ask why we make theories of truth. Don't we theorize about experiences in order to better understand those experiences? What happens when we abstract the object of study to a theory, and then use the theory to deny what it was that gave rise to the theory to begin with?

Are the theories not generated by looking at the various ways in which we speak of truth? Are the theories not abstracted from particular instances of truth? Why do we cling to a theory, even at the cost of denying the very thing that generated the theory to begin with? Instead of clinging to our theory saying, "so much the worse for *truth*," why don't we cling to our strongest intuitions of truth, which we sought to understand, and say, "So much the worse for *my theory of truth!*"? In light of this, let us look at the ways we speak of truth and see how the various views handle some common ways we use the word 'true.'

**a. Truth-Bearers.** In looking at the various ways these theories describe what counts as a truth-bearer, one thing is overlooked. In asking whether sentences, beliefs or propositions are the proper truth-bearers, the question assumes that it is just *one* of those. But even a brief look at the way we use the word 'true' shows that truth-bearers are not limited to these few options. We often speak of people as being truth-bearers of one type or another. For example, we often speak of a 'true friend,' or an athlete who is 'tried and true,' or aspire to be a 'true servant.' We also speak of a 'true piece of lumber,' or of steel with a 'true temper,' or weights hung so as to make a 'balance true.' A lyre might be out of tune until it is tuned and made 'true.' There are many such examples of speaking about truth that allow people, or even things, to be truth-bearers. When we refer to people or things as *truth-bearers*, it comes as no surprise, and in fact it seems quite fitting that we should do so. But why have our choices of truth-bearers been so drastically reduced over the last several hundred years? And, has this enriched our discourse and strengthened our understanding of truth, or has it weakened our understanding of ourselves and the world we live in?

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While I appreciate the clarity and insight that often comes from philosophical analysis and reflection, it seems to me that we have limited the possible field of truth-bearers because sentences and propositions are easier to analyze. Why deprive ourselves from the richness of a wider variety of possible truth-bearers for the sake of a false sense of clarity and simplicity?

In fact, it might be argued that disallowing persons to be truth-bearers is in part what has led us to embrace such unsatisfactory theories of truth. Perhaps those who have had a strong sense of human experience as a part of truth have incorporated human experience in the wrong place. Constructivists, for example, have identified human experience as the truth-maker when their intuitions could have been better served by identifying humans as a possible truth-bearer. Likewise, those with strong intuitions about the corrective claim of truth over the person have tried to protect the objectivity of truth by denying the validity of human experience as related to truth. Perhaps allowing humans to be truth-bearers would provide a way through this impasse.<sup>15</sup>

**b. Truth-Makers or Truth-Markers?** Another mistake common to most of these contemporary views is to confuse truth-markers with truth-makers. By truth-marker, I mean that which is a mark—or a sign—of truth. For example, incoherence is a likely sign or marker of falsity, just as coherence is a possible sign of truth. But coherence is not sufficient for truth—so coherence is a *marker* of truth, but it is not a *maker* of truth. Likewise, the pragmatic success of a belief may be a *mark* of its truth—a sign that it may indeed be true, but this does not make the belief true. A belief may work because it is true, but belief is not true simply because it works.

Those of us who have a synthesizing urge will be tempted to say of the various truth-makers previously mentioned, “Well it’s not one—it’s a combination of ALL of them.” But is that right? Each is still a marker, and simply combining the whole lot of them does not change the fact that they are truth markers, not makers. Before looking at how we might understand what makes truth-bearers true, I want to look briefly at one key factor that has been largely ignored.

**c. Truth as Relational.** In asking what property makes truth-bearers true, the question has been framed such that we look either to the object or the subject. Parker Palmer is one of the few voices suggesting that truth is not something that is made either by the subject or the object, but that it is made by a fundamental relation that comprises

object and subject together. He says that truth goes far beyond the mere ascription of properties to objects or subjects and he argues that “truth is neither ‘out there’ nor ‘in here,’ but both. “Truth is between us, in relationship, to be found in the dialogue of knowers and knowns who are understood as independent but accountable selves.”<sup>16</sup> This relational view of truth may help us understand what Jesus meant when he said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.”<sup>17</sup> Truth is not merely grasping something but involves being grasped *by* someone. A few isolated voices<sup>18</sup> have recently accentuated this relational aspect of truth, but more can be said about this, and it seems to me that Quakers, with a tradition to draw upon, can help lead the way toward seeing truth as a relational way of life.

## CONCLUSION

While I will not here take on the task of positing and defending a theory of truth, I will suggest that much can be gained by looking at truth differently than has been the pattern over the last several hundred years. I should make it clear that I am not seeking a theory of truth so that I can tell others they are wrong and I am right. I am looking for a view of truth that will allow me to be correct about my inward sense of light, but that will also allow me and my beliefs to be corrected. I am looking for a theory of truth that will help me see when and how I am being false to God and to others so that I can be a true servant and a true child of the light.

Long before much of philosophy was reduced to linguistic games and the analysis of properties, philosophy—in the Socratic tradition—was concerned with a way of life. Long before Christianity was reduced to a list of propositions, it was called ‘the Way.’ How is truth a ‘way’? Many people in various academic disciplines are just beginning to be dissatisfied with reductionistic views of truth. Longing for a return to seeing truth as a way of life, some may ask what Quakers have to contribute since Friends have had a history of embracing a holistic view of truth. What will we have to say? How will our ways of walking in truth give testimony to the truth? I hope that we will not rely on actions alone. I hope we will not rely on propositions alone. I hope that truth as a way of life will include the pursuit of true thoughts, true words and true deeds, and that none of us will have to travel this path alone.

## NOTES

1. This discussion of truth was presented at the QTDG in Toronto in November 2002, and this reference is to the QTDG that took place in Denver in November 2001.
2. To rule out teleology (*telos* means “end” or “goal”) as having any explanatory role is to exclude the possibility that a person’s inherent or designed purpose helps us understand that person’s behavior. An example of a human *telos* is to say that the chief end (*telos*) of humans is to love God and enjoy him forever. Some reject this notion because they assume we can understand an event without using this explanation. Others simply reject that humans have a *telos*, and still others argue that the goal of humans is either self-actualization or personal advancement and survival.
3. This is from the written reply to my review.
4. See *Quaker Religious Thought* #s 99 & 100, 2003, pp. 45-66.
5. For a detailed review of the major theories of truth along with analysis of those views, see Frederick F. Schmitt, *Theories of Truth*, Blackwell Readings in Philosophy 13 (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2003). See also Frederick F. Schmitt, *Truth: A Primer* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995). Another source with representative essays on different views of truth is Simon Blackburn and Keith Simmons, *Truth, Oxford Readings in Philosophy* (Oxford / New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). The Oxford collection, however, is not as representative of the variety of views and contains more essays on deflationary views of truth due to the fact that such views are most popular in current analytical philosophy.
6. A sentence differs from a statement in that a sentence is here referring to that which is written, whereas a statement refers to that which is spoken. A proposition is more general, and is roughly described as the content to which sentences, beliefs and statements refer. For a detailed discussion of truth-bearers see chapter one of William P. Alston, *A Realist Conception of Truth* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).
7. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, IV, 6, 1001b, p. 28.
8. Aquinas, ST., Q. 16, *De Veritate* Q.1, A.1&3.
9. This and several other serious problems can be seen developed at length Schmitt, *Theories of Truth*, pp. 11-16.
10. Ernest Becker, “The Fragile Fiction,” in *The Truth About the Truth: De-Confusing and Re-Constructing the Postmodern World* (New York: Putnam, 1995), p. 35.
11. Michel Foucault and Colin Gordon, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1980).
12. See Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, 1st ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966).
13. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge / New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 5.
14. Richard Wilbur, *New and Collected Poems*, 1st ed. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), p. 12.
15. Although I do not have the space to treat fully this topic here, I hope to explore elsewhere in further detail the implications of allowing humans, and even things, to be truth-bearers.
16. Parker J. Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1983), pp. 55-6.
17. John 14:6, NRSV.
18. In addition to Parker Palmer, see Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1962). See also Marjorie Grene, *The Knower and the Known* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).