

Truth in the Fire: C.S. Lewis and Pursuit of Truth Today

By **Dallas A. Willard** | July 21, 1998

Lewis on Truth and Logic

C. S. Lewis was devoted to the pursuit of truth, and was sure he had captured or been given a great deal of it. His confidence in this respect did not make him arrogant and close-minded, but was, to the contrary, the foundation of his remarkable humility and openness. In his third BBC lecture under the heading, “The Case for Christianity,” later published in **Mere Christianity**, he responds to those who might think he had been too hard on human beings in his previous lecture. There he had pointed out that human beings constantly fail to behave as they expect others to behave. He says to the potential objector: “I am not concerned at present with blame; I am trying to find out the truth. And from that point of view the very idea of something being imperfect, of its not being what it ought to be, has certain consequences.” (**Mere Christianity**, p. 13)

This is a very characteristic statement for Lewis. He understood the pursuit of truth to require devotion to logic as well, and hence to the following out of the consequences of truths discovered. Lewis took logic very seriously as a primary means of securing truth and avoiding falsehood. In the third BBC course of lectures, titled “Christian Behavior,” he comments that “We are now getting to the point at which different beliefs about the universe lead to different behavior.” “Religion,” he continues, “involves a series of statements about facts, which must be either true or false. If they are true, one set of conclusions will follow about the right sailing of the human fleet: if they are false, quite a different set.” (**Mere Christianity**, p. 58)

The Christian tradition, as well as its alternatives, must—on his view—essentially contain claims about reality which are either true or false. The fundamental task we face is to determine which claims are true and what logically follows from them. Only so can we come to terms with reality and successfully direct our lives into harmonious relationships with it.

In response to anticipated complaints about the difficulty of basic Christian doctrine he remarks further on in his BBC lectures: “Christianity claims to be telling us about another world, about something behind the world we can touch and hear and see. You may think the claim is false; but if it were true, what it tells us would be bound to be difficult—at least as difficult as modern physics, and for the same reason.” (p. 121)

Now Lewis held what has traditionally been called the “correspondence theory of truth.” This could properly be called the classical theory of truth, because it was held with little exception up to the 19th Century. He held, in other words, that truth is a matter of a belief or idea (representation, statement) corresponding to reality. In the course of rejecting the view that moral laws are mere social conventions he insists that they are, to the contrary, “Real truths.” “If your moral ideas can be truer, and those of the Nazi less true,” he says to his reader, “there must be something—some Real morality—for them to be true about. The reason why your idea of New York can be truer or less true than mine is that New York is a real place, existing quite apart from what either of us thinks. If when each of us said ‘New York’ each meant merely ‘the town I am imagining in my own head’, how could one of

us have truer ideas than the other? There would be no question of truth or falsehood at all.” (**Mere Christianity**, p. 11; cp. **The Abolition of Man**, pp. 27-29)

The Contemporary Disdain of Truth: “Postmodernism”

The case for “Real truth” is, unfortunately, much more complicated and harder to make stand up (or even get a hearing) now than it was when Lewis wrote these words in the early 1940’s. Not intrinsically or in itself, of course; for that does not change. But in terms of numerous popular presumptions that have arisen, mistakenly, against “Real truth.” Nowadays truth itself, in the sense in which Lewis and most of his contemporaries still thought it to be of central human importance, is in the fire.

To be sure, this is not exactly a new thing. David Hume long ago (mid-18th Century) consigned truth to the flames in the famous passage at the end of his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. There he advised us to look through our libraries and ask of each book whether it deals with matters mathematical or sense-perceptible (feelable). If it does not, he said, we should “commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.”

Truth, of course, is not a matter of quantity, not mathematically describable; and it also is not sense-perceptible or feelable. Truth is not something physical or “naturalistic,” as we would now say. And our general intellectual, artistic and academic culture has by this time caught up with Hume in rejecting “Real truth.” Two centuries of cultural development were needed for that. Truth, along with goodness and beauty (both of which David Hume manipulated into something feelable or sentimental), are no longer generally thought of as realities independent of human attitudes. And that, of course, is simply what it means to say they are not “objective.” Lewis believed they were objective, and spent much of his time explaining and defending their objectivity.

In the face of present attitudes, however, even earnestness about truth—also about goodness and beauty—is definitely uncool. It might be tolerated in a Freshman. But he or she would be expected to wise up quickly, and might pay a stiff price for not doing so. The idea of devoting one’s life to truth, goodness or beauty is now quaint if not ridiculous, on the campus as in the corporation. They are not considered to be objective realities against which human life is or can be measured.

That is certainly the message that comes to us from the polymorphous clouds of Postmodernism(s) that hang over all our intellectual, artistic and cultural life now. Christopher Norris, one of the very best writers on these subjects, points out that in Postmodernism’s most emphatic representatives, such as Jean Baudrillard and Richard Rorty, “the ideas of truth, validity or right reason simply drop out of the picture.” (**What’s Wrong With Postmodernism**, p. 165) There is for them no possibility of achieving “an accurate match between real-world objects or states of affairs and concepts of pure understanding.” (p. 167) “The idea that one can criticize existing beliefs from some superior vantage-point of truth, reason or scientific method,” Norris continues (168), is considered a self-delusion deriving from the Enlightenment period of Western thought—by now supposedly shown by history to be a delusion.

Of course Baudrillard and Rorty still believe that their own views of truth, validity and reason are true, valid and reasonable. They believe that their own views of how language and thought relate to reality present us with how things really are. (Let them simply state the contrary if they do not.) And I have noticed that the most emphatic of

Postmodernists turn coldly modern when discussing their fringe benefits or other matters that make a great difference to their practical life. They also—on many occasions during each day—discover that some of their ideas, beliefs and statements about very ordinary matters do (or do not) match up to the actual condition of what those beliefs and statements are about. They share this with every competent human being. (They thought their keys were on the table, for example, but found that they were wrong.) But a powerful thrust of the *Zeitgeist* such as Postmodernism is not to be impeded by little details such as these.

A Devil's Advice

Lewis clearly saw the early stages of the present situation, though I doubt he could have begun to imagine the attitude toward “Real Truth” maintained now by its contemporary “cultured despisers.”

In the fabulous *Screwtape's* first letter we find him advising his nephew devil, Wormwood, that argument is not the way to keep his, Wormwood's, “patient” from the Enemy's (God's) clutches. “That might have been so if he had lived a few centuries earlier,” he says. “At that time,” *Screwtape* continues “humans still knew pretty well when a thing was proved and when it was not; and if it was proved they really believed it. They still connected thinking with doing and were prepared to alter their way of life as the result of a chain of reasoning. But what with the weekly press and other such weapons, we have largely altered that,” *Screwtape* points out. “Your man has been accustomed, ever since he was a boy, to having a dozen incompatible philosophies dancing about together inside his head. He doesn't think of doctrines as primarily ‘true’ or ‘false’, but as ‘academic’ or ‘practical’, ‘outworn’ or ‘contemporary’, ‘conventional’ or ‘ruthless’. Jargon, not argument, is your best ally in keeping him from the Church. Don't waste time trying to make him think that materialism is true! Make him think it is strong or stark or courageous—that it is the philosophy of the future. That's the sort of thing he cares about.” (***Screwtape Letters***, p. 7-8)

Instead of argument, which, *Screwtape* says, “moves the whole struggle onto the Enemy's own ground,” Wormwood is advised to hold his patient's attention—just as David Hume would have it—to the “stream of immediate sense experiences,” and to “Teach him to call it ‘real life’ and don't let him ask what he means by ‘real’.” (p. 8) In that stream of sensations, of course, neither truth nor logic is to be found.

On Facts and Reality

One gathers from all this, I think, a clear and accurate impression of Lewis's outlook on truth and its vital importance for human existence. Now we turn to some reflections—in the spirit if not with the power of this friend of truth—on the contemporary situation of Real truth, as it stands in the flames of current disdain and ridicule. We begin with some clarification of what a fact is, what it is to be real, and then what a truth is.

We all have, as a part of the equipment necessary to enable us to navigate the course of our existence, the ability to discern properties things have and relations things stand in.

A child quickly learns to distinguish milk from Coca-Cola, and to tell which bag of candy or scoop of ice cream is larger. As time goes on it learns to articulate what goes into such differences, and to distinguish, not just milk

from coca-cola, but the different properties—flavor, color, etc.—that enter into such differences as that between milk and coca-cola or dog and cat.

Our education as human beings largely consists in becoming able to identify and interrelate the very large number of properties and relations that are distributed over the various types of entities that make up our self and our world. Such ability is essential to human competence. One could hardly cross the street, much less hold a job of the simplest sort without it. Now we must hold onto these ideas of properties and relations as we continue.

If an entity, regardless of type, has a particular property or relation, its having that property or relation makes up what we here call a fact. This is an extremely common notion, and one that has received much attention from philosophers. (Cp. B. Russell, **The Philosophy of Logical Atomism**, 1st Lecture) It is, for example, a fact that I am standing before you now or that you are reading this paragraph.

Reality, then, taken as a whole, is the sum total of facts. And to be real, to exist, is to be a constituent in a fact.

Please bear with me a moment longer on these painfully abstract, but crucial, points.

Any object of thought or discourse that actually has properties or relations exists or is real; and, conversely, any object that exists has some properties and relations. To illustrate, an object—e.g. Pegasus the winged horse of mythology—does not exist, is not real. That means that the relevant properties we associate with him (horseness, wingness, etc.) do not belong to anything in unison. If they did that thing would be Pegasus, and Pegasus would exist.

But now please notice. Being a fact has nothing to do, in general, with being-thought-of or being-mentioned or being-described, or, as the philosopher W. V. O Quine would say, “being in the range of a bound variable.” Currently this is widely denied. Many people now take facts and their constituents to be created by consciousness (individual or collective) or by language or culture. Wondrously creative powers are attributed to human thought.

But upon careful reflection it is surely clear that a universe just like ours except devoid of conscious beings and their languages would still be a universe of facts and existents—facts such as the relative sizes and positions of the planets in our solar system, or the structure and habits of gastropods, or the inner structure of carbon atoms. Thought and language, being what they are, have no ability to produce or to restructure the objects which they are about: that is, to “construct” them. Of course thought and language (culture) are themselves facts or realities, and as such they have real consequences in the real world. But that is a very different matter from constructing objects by merely thinking or speaking of them.

There is, I know, a long and influential Constructionist story running from Descartes to Nietzsche and the Logical Positivists. Modern Philosophy is burdened with fundamental errors about the connection between the mind and its world of objects. We cannot detail them here. But it is one of the ironies of contemporary thought that the very thinkers who have the strongest appreciation of the follies of so-called “Representationalism” in Modern Philosophy nonetheless remain Constructionist in their own outlook.

In summary, then: facts are a matter of properties actually belonging to certain things, and facts are not produced by our mere thoughts or judgments of them. Now let us consider the relationship of facts (and truth) to action.

The Intransigence of Fact and Truth

With respect to human action, facts are totally unforgiving. One might in a preliminary way define reality (or fact) as what you run into when you are wrong. The collision is usually painful. When you assume or believe your car to be well supplied with gasoline when it is not, you may find yourself in great danger or discomfort. This is true even of Baudrillard and Rorty in their real lives.

When you believe in or trust a crooked or incompetent financial advisor to be honest and capable, you may wind up depending upon your relatives or the state and have to kiss your golden years goodbye. How things are does not say: "Oh, well, since you believed there was gas in the tank or that the advice was sound, it shall just be so." All roads do not lead to Rome or anywhere else. Beliefs must come to terms with facts, not facts with beliefs.

A New Yorker cartoon recently showed a man in a business suit being turned away by St. Peter at the gates of heaven. He was saying to St. Peter: "Don't you realize you are criminalizing a policy difference?" But facts make even less allowance for what you believed than God or St. Peter. There is no such thing as a fact that accommodates itself to what is merely believed about it or to how it is thought of. Some facts can be changed, no doubt, but never by belief alone—nor, we should add, by wish or desire alone. Some facts can be changed or abolished by will and action, but many cannot be changed even by these.

Now among the facts and the things that are or exist, there are, precisely, beliefs and statements themselves, with their properties of truth or falsity and their logical relations. Beliefs are states or acts of persons, and statements are linguistic correlates of such states and acts. They are very real and very important. Our lives for the most part run on the rails of our beliefs, going where and only where our beliefs go. This is something that C. S. Lewis often emphasized.

Beliefs are, or at least involve, dispositions or readinesses to act as if something were the case or were a fact. For example, the readiness to act as if there were gas in your tank or as if your financial advisor were reliable, or as if the person setting next to you were an unceasing spiritual being with a glorious destiny in God's great universe.

But, as we have already noted, it is a part of the precarious human condition that acting or being ready to act as if something were so does not guarantee that it is so. We can act as if something were so-and-so when it is not, and when we do we have a more or less unpleasant collision with reality. An entire society, culture or historical epoch can do this and has done so. We get smashed by the car running the stoplight or we get AIDs from a supposedly faithful lover. Reality makes no allowance for our beliefs, desires or good intentions. It just says: "Here is how things are. Now you have that to deal with."

We all discover this at an early age, and with it we discover truth and falseness. Our thoughts, beliefs, hopes and expectations, as well as what we and others say, often do (or do not) match up with what those thoughts, beliefs etc. are about. This fact, this "matching up" is truth. It is something quite independent of all theories. No matter what your theories are, you will experience it and identify it as such. This is how we learn to speak of truth, learn the "language game" of truth.

Of course this “match up” is not a mathematically quantifiable fact, nor is it sense-perceptible, or feelable in any sense other than that we are often conscious of it. It is not an “empirical” reality. Thus, as Lewis well knew and emphasized, it does not suit the prejudices of our naturalistic age about what facts must be. (Recall pp. 81 of **The Abolition of Man** for what Lewis understands by “Natural.”)

But then those empiricist/naturalistic prejudices about what kinds of facts and realities there can be are not themselves mathematical or empirical—not verifiable by mathematical calculation or sense perception—and so are self-condemned at best. They do not meet their own requirement of intellectual respectability. They only have current fashions on their side. In addition they are refuted by abundant counter cases: by the reality of various familiar facts that are neither mathematical nor empirical—such as, precisely, the truth or reasonableness of a given idea or belief.

Naturalism, as Lewis repeatedly argued, cannot be a rationally defensible position precisely because it rules out Real truth, and reason based thereon. He agrees with much of the Postmodern critique of Modernity. I doubt he ever read a line of Heidegger, but he had no need to. He understood on his own grounds—the study of human thought and imagination—the ravages of atomism, Scientism, technology, and the Modern loss of rootedness in the “Tao” of absolute value. But he realized, as many of our contemporaries do not, that it was no solution to the disasters of Modernity simply to drop absolute truth, reality and values.

Besides, one cannot actually just drop them. Their presence remains in the thought and life of all who try, such as Nietzsche and Derrida. It is one of the characteristics of most late 19th and 20th Century philosophy that it denies the very conditions which alone make philosophy possible. But then it assumes those very conditions in that it rejects them precisely on the basis of philosophical arguments. Essences and their accompanying claims about what must be the case are inevitable, and the writings of Nietzsche, Derrida, Richard Rorty etc., are fully of them. The result is either the surrender of philosophy as a cognitive enterprise, or the surrender of Real truth claims about language, consciousness and the world, or the continuation of such claims in bad faith. The latter is the course usually chosen, for example by Wittgenstein, Quine and Derrida.

All this puts us in position to see that, while belief is relative—a fact or statement is believed only if someone believes it—truth is not relative. One believes something, one does not truth it or fact it. Again, we can and should experiment with this. Try getting your car to run by believing gas is in your tank. Or by also enlisting others to believe it, or by generating a social movement in favor of it. One million Frenchmen (or Americans, etc.) can be wrong, and adding a million or two more will make no difference—although they may be helpful in getting the government to pay for the consequences of being wrong.

All of this Lewis understood very well. On several occasions his writings turn to stating and defending at lengths anti-empiricist (anti-naturalist) views of truth and reason. His view was that meaning, from which truth and reason derive, “is a relation of a wholly new kind, as remote, as mysterious, as opaque to empirical study, as soul itself.” (See “Religion Without Dogma,” especially pp. 87-88 of the **Socratic Digest**, #4; cp. “Is Religion Poetry?” **Socratic Digest**, #3, p. 33, Chapter 3 of **The Abolition of Man**, and Chapter 3 of **Miracles**) The relations of meaning, truth and reason he knew to be totally indifferent to what anyone may think or feel about them. They are objective in the strongest of senses. That just means they cannot vary with what we think or feel about them. And yet, like the Tao itself, they are in general quite comprehensible even though non-empirical. They—relations of meaning, truth and reason—are realities, facts, in the sense we have explained.

At this point a general comment about Empiricism is needed. Empiricism (now usually called “Naturalism”) is, roughly stated, the view that reality (facts) and knowledge are limited to the sense-perceptible and what can be logically derived from or, more loosely, based upon the sense-perceptible—for example, sub-particle physics. Empiricism was perhaps historically inevitable. But it has, in many ways, certainly been an unfortunate episode in the career of Western thought, and now lies like a blight upon world culture. It is self-refuting, as already noted, in that it is a claim that cannot be verified empirically. Empiricism is simply a stipulation, not a discovery, of what is to be counted as real and knowable; and from the very beginning, in Hobbes and then in John Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, it was ideologically driven—driven by certain social needs as understood by its advocates.

All of this remains true of the later formulations of Empiricism, such as classical Positivism (Comte, Mach—really, Nietzsche), Logical Positivism, and Linguistic Analysis. They are all movements of a distinctly missionary and salvationist tone, and are exercises in ideological imperialism. Of course any comprehensive outlook, including **Mere Christianity**, runs the risk of becoming merely ideological in the hands of its advocates. But, be that as it may, it remains a stubborn fact that much of significant human interest—including, most importantly, human knowledge (including science and truth) itself—cannot be accounted for in Empiricist/Positivist terms or in terms of the “Natural” world. (See the exhaustive treatment of this point in Edmund Husserl, **The Crisis of European Sciences**, etc.) One might be excused for thinking that the course of human thought has now made this clear, but there remain many well-known thinkers who still hope that “science” interpreted naturalistically will eventually answer all questions that can be answered. Perhaps one can only wonder at the strength of their faith.

What Truth Is

And now let us go back over some of the ground we have just covered to make explicit the nature of truth. When the object of our belief or statement is as we believe or state it to be, when it “matches up” to that object in the familiar way already indicated by cases, our belief or statement is true. Truth is just this characteristic of “matching up.” Otherwise our belief or statement is false. Truth and falsity are, then, objective properties of beliefs and statements—more precisely, of representations and propositions, but this is technical language which we cannot trouble to introduce here. They are objective ways in which beliefs and statements differ and resemble among themselves, just as colors (red, yellow, green) and sizes are objective ways in which apples and other things differ and resemble among themselves.

There are here three major points we must attend to:

(A) In many cases the truth-property (or the falsity) of a belief or statement can be directly confirmed by examining what the belief (or statement) is about and comparing it with the belief. These cases are the ones where, as children, we all learn what truth is.

Once while in a meeting of the Faculty Senate at the USC/LA County hospital, my automobile was stolen. I still believed that it was where I parked it and acted accordingly. When, upon leaving the meeting, I came to the place where I had parked it by the curb, I experienced the shocking incongruity of my belief (that the car was there) with the facts. I believed my car was there, but now saw it was not as I believed. I lived through the incongruity of belief with fact and was strongly conscious of that incongruity. I directly knew, was aware of, that

incongruity which is falseness, just as in other cases I have known the congruity (“correspondence”) which it truth.

We characteristically say “I don’t believe it!” in such cases, because we don’t believe it—that is, we don’t believe the fact that presents itself to us in place of the one we are in the course of acting as if it were there. It takes a while for our beliefs to adjust to reality. Then we do “believe it,” and trudge our way to the police station and report how things are.

A child becomes competent very early at directly determining the truth and falsity of beliefs and statements, just it does with multitudes of other qualities and relations. It frequently knows that what you believe or tell it is true or false, as the case may be, by direct comparison of your beliefs and statements with what they are about—so long, of course, as the subject matter is indeed open to examination and comparison with the beliefs and statements in question.

The child very soon learns what it is to lie, and learns to detect lies by examining the subject matter in comparison with statements made to it. A dignitary such as Pontius Pilate or a university professor can well say, rhetorically, “What is truth?” But that is never accepted as a response from a child being interrogated about vanished cookies, nor will a child accept it as an explanation of a broken promise. They know what truth is very well, even though, as they also know, it is not easy to determine in some cases. —Is it true there is a Santa Claus, for example, or a tooth fairy?

(B). Now what we find truth (or falsity) to be in the cases where we can compare beliefs or statements to what they are about is exactly what truth is in the cases where we do not or cannot directly compare belief or thought with its object. For example, whether a certain candidate won an election, or whether Milton in *Paradise Lost* really intended to glorify rebellion. That, in a given case, we cannot confirm truth by direct comparison, or that we cannot confirm it at all—for there very well may be beliefs or statements that are true (or false) but (for whatever reason) can never be confirmed by human minds to be such—does not change the nature of truth itself for such cases. The truth of a belief or statement is not created by verification, but discovered by it. Otherwise we could prevent a belief from being true by refusing to verify it. In the cases most difficult to verify, truth remains “correspondence” of the general type we came to know in the verified cases.

For a belief, thought or statement to be true is simply for its subject matter to be as it is represented, or as it is held to be, in that belief, thought or statement. When we confirm that a hitherto unconfirmed belief or statement is true, we do not create the relation (correspondence) it actually has to what it is about, any more that we create the fit of a wrench to a bolt head by placing the wrench on the bolt head, or the fit of a door to a frame by putting the door in the frame. The wrench fits the bolt head (or does not) even if it is never placed upon the bolt head, and the door fits the frame (or does not) even if it is never placed within it. And, similarly, a representation that is true is true even if it is never verified—by direct comparison with its object or otherwise. Truth is not the same thing as verification, nor dependent upon verification, any more than the fit or “correspondence” of the wrench to the bolt head is or is dependent upon the juxtaposition of the wrench upon the bolt head.

(C). Moreover, truth, as we have seen in the case of fact and reality, is totally unyielding in the face of belief, desire, tradition and will. There is no such thing as a belief or statement whose quality of truth or falsity is modified by mere belief or disbelief, desire or aversion, habit or tradition or social practice or professional opinion, or will and intent. We state it once again: belief is relative, as are our perceptions, but truth is not. Truth

is a relation, a “correspondence,” but not one that depends upon belief or attitude. It is a relation, but it is not “relative”. It pertains to the mind in a certain sense—as a property of beliefs and statements—but it is not “subjective” in the sense that it varies with our attitudes about it or would not exist unless those attitudes did.

A book was recently published under the title, **Truth Is Not What It Used To Be**. But now we can see, I hope, that truth is exactly what it used to be, and will always be so. It is a certain property or relation-like structure, and as such it is not the kind of thing that can change, any more than grey and yellow or sister or brother can—which is a totally different matter than how we choose to use the words “grey,” “yellow,” “sister,” and “brother.” When philosophers of the last two centuries have suggested that truth—this relation-like structure of correspondence that we all become acquainted with in our early years—is “really” the logical coherence or practical utility of beliefs or statements, their suggestion is no more worthy of serious consideration than would be a suggestion that yellow is really an odor or that being a sister is the same thing as being a seamstress. Their suggestion was in fact based on the assumption that we cannot compare beliefs and statements with what they are about—an assumption that is refuted by the fact that everyone constantly does it.

Now my hope is that these points will reassure each of us concerning our own individual knowledge of what truth is in its very nature, and permit us not to be deflected from appreciation of its real-life seriousness by the confusions of its current cultured despisers.

Life Depends on True Belief

But why is truth of such fundamental importance for life? Why is it so important as to warrant the high regard traditionally given to truth?

The importance of truth as a property of belief—and, by extension, the importance of knowledge of such truth—for human well-being lies chiefly in the role of belief and representation in our actions. Lewis (“Is Theology Poetry,” in **Screwtape Proposes a Toast**, pp. 44ff) and many others have suggested that truth is of intrinsic—possibly aesthetic—value. And there is, I think, a certain beauty and inherent desirability to truth. Most people do in fact strongly prefer to grasp things as they are without reference to whether or not it is useful to do so. But however that is, our representations and beliefs also are the indispensable means by which we “aim” our actions toward future states of our existence, individual and collective. If they are true then—given no external intrusions—we “hit” the situation intended. For example, if our beliefs about what materials and structures in buildings will preserve the buildings in a 7.2 earthquake are true, then, by following them out in action, when such an earthquake strikes, the buildings we build remain standing. The survival of the buildings in the earthquake is literally due to the truth of the beliefs we relied on in constructing them. If those beliefs had been false, things would have turned out otherwise than they did.

Our representations and beliefs are, in relation to our actions and expectations, comparable to the sighting mechanism on a rifle or artillery piece. The sight, when appropriately set, indicates where the bullet or projectile will strike. Our belief is, similarly, supposed to indicate where action will strike, and, if true, it does so. If false it doesn't. In many ordinary cases, as we have seen, it is possible to determine if our beliefs are true by comparing them to what they are about, or by careful inference, or even by acting on them, just as we can check in various ways whether the sighting mechanism on a rifle is ‘true’—possibly by firing it and comparing the result with the setting of the sighting mechanism.

On the other hand, many beliefs—and, indeed, many of those most important to human life—cannot be in any direct and immediate way "compared" to what they are about, and sometimes in no way at all. This is certainly true in the political sphere. Is it, for example, true that the passage of a certain law will lead to the consequences that its advocates claim? Are their statements about the proposed law true? Time will, perhaps, tell—though even it may not. It has recently been said that "The overwhelming sense among people in power in Russia today is that the revolution which established the Soviet republic was a conspiratorial coup d'état that shunted the country off the track of democracy, onto a tragic trajectory which took 74 years to reverse." (Ronald Grigor Suny, **Los Angeles Times**, Book Review Section, Sunday, June 28, 1998, p. 6) Alas for the human blood that must be spilled to find if grand social theories are true or false!

But as we have said, Real truth retains its basic nature as correspondence to the respective reality, outlined above, even in the case of ideas and statements which cannot be directly verified, or possibly cannot be verified at all. Tests applied to determine truth where "direct comparison" is ruled out—tests such as "coherence" or "workability" or "scientific acceptability" do not, when correctly used, introduce different notions of truth. Rather, they introduce different ways of identifying the presence of truth, precisely in the sense of correspondence or "Real truth." It can only confuse matters to try to equate coherence, usefulness, etc. with truth. They obviously are not the same thing as truth. Similarly for equating "true" with "'true' for me." "'True' for me" just means I believe it. But as we have already seen, what is 'true' for me is often false, does not 'fit'."

There is, then, nothing inherently enigmatic about truth itself. It is only enigmatic for those who have previously adopted a philosophy of mind, language and reality that makes it impossible or inaccessible. And the overwhelmingly common direct experience of "matching up," as described above, explains why the understanding of truth as a kind of correlation or harmony—"correspondence"—between a thought and its object dominated human thought for so long. Plato's *Theaetetus* and Aristotle's *Categories* both advance what is clearly a "correspondence" account of truth. Aquinas uses the Latin formula, "Veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus," which remained familiar and widely accepted into the present century. For Kant, "Truth consists in the agreement of knowledge with its object" (**Critique of Pure Reason**, B 83, 236), or "the conformity of our concepts with the object." (B 670)

Hegel and other Post-Kantian figures begin to speak of truth in ways which certainly involve more than correspondence, or even rule it out entirely. However, yet more recent thinkers such as G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell, or Edmund Husserl and Alfred Tarski, provide strong representation for the correspondence account of truth in the 20th Century. Even Martin Heidegger adopted a fairly straightforward correspondence account of the truth of assertions. And in the latest discussions of truth in analytic philosophy, correspondence at least shows up as one of the most serious alternatives in analyzing it. We have already identified Lewis' view of truth as a correspondence view. (Cp. **The Abolition of Man**, p. 27-29)

Two of the Main Arguments Against "Real Truth"

But if all of this is so, what is it that, today, has turned the worlds of thought and culture so strongly against "Real truth" in the sense of correspondence with reality? There are various political ideas that resist Real truth. In some quarters it is actually believed that democracy depends upon the relativity of truth to belief and upon no one being in possession of Real truth. But I shall not consider the political issues and shall mention here only the two

main lines of argument that must be successfully dealt with if Real truth is to resume its rightful place at the center of human life and thought. I must beg forgiveness for here stating in very simple terms matters of profound complexity and difficulty.

(A). First, there is the widespread conviction now that human consciousness (representation, thought) simply must be interpreted in naturalistic terms. This conviction has only increased in strength since Lewis' day. But of course he was fully informed and especially concerned about it, and we know his attitude toward it. Practically speaking, naturalism means that consciousness must be understood as a feature of either the brain, or of language as a social practice. What drives this view, I think, is the still deeper level conviction that knowledge must be unified into one whole, and that it all somehow derives from physics: the mathematical analysis of the sense-perceptible world. (E. O. Wilson, **Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge**, Knopf, 1998, is the latest popular statement of this view.) One of the significant contributions of Postmodernism is its rejection of the hegemony of Physics, but then Postmodernism also has the strong tendency to treat Consciousness as linguistic, and hence as cultural and social.

The difficulty with this naturalistic view is that brains, as well as units of language, simply do not have the "semantic" properties which consciousness manifestly has: most importantly, meaning (intentionality), truth or falsity, and logical relations. This is not an unknown fact. Thinkers such as Richard Taylor (**Introduction to Metaphysics**, chapter 4) and John Searle (**The Rediscovery of the Mind**, chapters 1 & 2 etc.) make much of it, and rightly so. But then, driven by their own naturalistic faith, which remains intact, they are forced to assign the properties of consciousness to the brain or body anyway—with no intelligible account of how this could be. They only say, in effect, "Why not?" Why not allow that the human body (or brain) just is the kind of physical object that has these properties? This, I think, is not a very successful account of the mind, and to continue to call it "naturalistic" is a mere tour de force at best.

As for language, it too does not exhibit the basic properties of human consciousness when analyzed from a strictly naturalistic point of view. Utterances, linguistic acts, and sentences give no indication, considered in themselves—have a close look at them—that they mean or are about anything, or that they are true or false, or reasonable or unreasonable. That is why one cannot learn a language, or discover linguistic meanings, just by hearing or looking at the units of language.

Quite generally, it is only if we already know what consciousness is on other grounds—mainly from our own self-awareness—that we can begin to think of brains and language in connection with consciousness at all. This is the great Cartesian fact that no one can, finally, avoid.

Matters I am only briefly mentioning here are part of long and difficult discussions, of course. But it is clear that at no known level of naturalistic analysis does a brain state or event reveals that it is or has consciousness. And, on the other hand, if consciousness were truly linguistic, how odd that more than two millennia of thinking, by some pretty intelligent people, yielded no inkling of it. It is an interesting exercise to try to pinpoint the exact place in our recent history where the linguistic nature of consciousness was discovered, and how, precisely, it was discovered. It in fact was not discovered!

What one finds in that effort is that the linguistic interpretation of the human mind arose as an unproven presupposition in order to accommodate the demands of the naturalistic—presumably "scientific"—world view. (The Wittgensteinian emphasis upon the centrality of what is "public" in the understanding of language and mind

comes out to much the same thing.) And we could all agree that if naturalism is true, then it would be reasonable to think that consciousness must be either physiological/chemical or social/linguistic. But that is no good reason to think that naturalism is true, in spite of its overwhelming popularity in academic circles today.

(B). The second main argument against “Real truth” rests upon the widespread assumption that consciousness (language, history, culture) transforms its objects in “touching” them, so that they are never “in themselves” what we take them to be in becoming aware of them or knowing them or introducing them into language. It is useful to call this the “Midas Touch” epistemology, because of the similarity, on this account, of consciousness/language to the mythological King Midas, who turned everything he touched to gold.

Jean-Paul Sartre called this same epistemology a “digestive philosophy,” according to which “the spidery mind trapped things in its web, covered them with white spit and slowly swallowed them, reducing them to its own substance. What is a table, a rock, a house? A certain assemblage of ‘contents of consciousness’, a class of such contents. O digestive philosophy!.... The corpulent skeletons of the world were picked clean by these diligent diastases: assimilation, unification, identification. The simplest and plainest among us vainly looked for something solid, something not just mental, but would encounter everywhere only a soft and very genteel mist: themselves.” (“Intentionality: A Fundamental Idea of Husserl’s Phenomenology,” **Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology**, Vol. I, 1970, pp. 4-5)

Because of this widespread assumption of transformation by the mind or language, statements such as the following by John Hick are very common today: “The world is indeed there, and is as it is; but we do not have access to it as it is in itself, unperceived by us. We are aware of it only as it impinges upon us and is perceived and inhabited by us in terms of many kinds and levels of disposition meaning.” (“On Religious Experience,” in J. J. MacIntosh and H. A. Meynell, ed., **Faith, Scepticism and Personal Identity**, U. of Calgary Press, 1994)

In one version or another this view is defended by such philosophers as Carl Hempel, Brand Blanshard, Donald Davidson, W. V. O. Quine, Michael Williams, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Hilary Putnam, and of course the numerous Postmodernist writers. Hick’s position is actually close to Kant, who also admits a “thing in itself” beyond our cognitive grasp. But many (e.g. Nietzsche, Ernst Mach, and the Logical Positivists) have seen no point in retaining such a useless addendum and have maintained that there is only the world we construct by our interpretations.

This has now become such a point of “common sense” that you may be amazed that anyone could question it. But the air of common-sense reasonableness disappears once you probe into exactly how language (or the mind) does to its objects what it is alleged that it does.

In any case, the Midas Touch view of the mind (language, culture) makes access to “Real Truth” impossible—and for the more radical thinkers makes “Real Truth” itself impossible, if not ridiculous. And it is this second main line of argument from the transforming power of mind and language—sometimes combined with the first—that leads the charge against “Real truth” as correspondence with a “real world” in which we have to find our way and become the kind of person we are going to be.

A Brief Critique of the “Midas Touch” View.

This transformational or “Constructionist” view, however, is called into serious question by two points:

First, it actually presents itself as a bit of “Real truth”: as the Real truth about the mind in relation to its world. It does not say: “As I or we think of or experience the world, the world is a construct of the mind, but it might not be that way at all.” It says simply, “The world is a construct of the mind,” and even “The mind constructs the world—including the mind.” And it means it. It intends to give us the very essence of the world/mind relationship as it is independently of how anyone may or may not think of it. But of course this cannot be done if the Constructionist’s own theory is correct. For in thinking about that relationship one modifies it, or “constructs” it.

And second—as was pointed out in our discussion of facts—it has never been explained how, precisely, the mind (language, culture) being what it is could actually make or construct a world of things such as solar systems and blades of grass, being what they are. From the beginning of the effort centuries ago, we have many, many explanations of how and why we think of or perceive things in the world as we do. But that is, simply, quite another topic. Certainly our thinkings and perceivings themselves are, in a sense, made by us; but that is not so of what our thinkings and perceivings are about or of—our objects, our subjects.

This critical point is as true of objects such as historical events, literature, and moral values—the “fuzzy stuff” of life—as it is of the “hard” objects such as bricks and planets. The elements of the political, the moral and the artistic certainly are different in nature from the physical world, and they pose problems for knowledge that are peculiar to them. But how they—as distinct from our inquiries and thought and discourse about them—could be created or formed by mind or language has never yet been explained, and no explanation seems forthcoming.

Candidly examined, the mind or culture of the human being simply has no hermetically sealed “inside,” such as the advocates of the Midas Touch epistemology would have us accept. We are in a world other than ourselves, and we are equipped to deal with it as it is, correcting our mistakes and misperceptions as we go. But here, as with the first main line of argument—“naturalism”—that comes against “Real Truth,” there is much work for us to do if we are to sustain the methods and objectives of C. S. Lewis.

The Unfinished Task

Of course Lewis cannot be expected to give us responses to the challenges of our own day. Each generation must fight its own battles, though it must learn much from the past. Today the main task before us is nothing less than the redemption of reason, of the intellect itself—within the academy, and then across the broad range of human life. It is reason itself, not just truth, that is now fighting for its life. And it, like truth, is lost as a resource of human existence unless it can be identified and used independently of the adoption or rejection of political and cultural outlooks deemed proper or improper.

Although it is not a theme for this talk to develop, the loss of competent reason in our culture manifests itself mainly in the fields of Law and Education. These two fundamental areas have collapsed or are collapsing under the impact of desire and will unchecked by reason. That is but a natural outcome of the disappearance of “Real truth,” for without it reason has nothing to serve but the ends of desire and whatever power it can bring to bear to realize them. (See Lewis’s discussion of Ratio and Intellectus in chapter VII, subsection D, of **The Discarded Image**.)

Human desire is of course not bad in itself. It is good. But unchecked by reason and reality it always opposes truth as “Real truth” that puts us in touch with reality; for desire unchecked always demands more than reality can give. Therefore there is a deep human drive toward setting truth aside, and what better way to do this than by just denying its reality altogether—or at least its accessibility. Naturalism, as Lewis saw so well (**The Abolition of Man**. etc.), is in the end the slave of desire, which, if allowed to rule unchecked will destroy humanity. For desire to have its way through the instrumentality of naturalism, truth must go, precisely, into the fire.

What we must be sure of now, and must act upon, is that only through the rescue of truth—“Real truth” as correspondence with fact—can reason itself be salvaged, and thereby human life sustained in the power and dignity it cries out for by its nature and divine appointment. The excesses and mistakes of Modernity should not be allowed to obscure this fundamental point. None, I believe, would be more emphatic about it than C. S. Lewis himself.

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