

TRUTH – A Conversation between P F Strawson and Gareth Evans (1973)¹

Introduced by Susan Wilson, Lecturer in Philosophy, The Open University

[00:00:27] Wilson: When a philosopher asks the question, ‘What is truth?’, we need to know what would count as a satisfactory answer. The two philosophers you are now going to hear are looking for an answer which will do at least two things. First, it must show what all true statements have in common. The reason why we want to know this is because we want to explain why it is that we apply the same word, ‘true’, to many different kinds of statements. We want to show how all true statements resemble each other. But if we want to give a complete account of this, we also need to show how different kinds of true statement are related to each other. And this is the second thing that we demand of a satisfactory account of truth. We want to show both how true statements resemble each other, and how they differ. Here now to discuss such an account of truth are P F Strawson of Magdalen College, Oxford, and Gareth Evans of University College, Oxford.

[00:01:44] Strawson: Well, some 50 years ago, as you know, of course, Frank Ramsey said that there was no serious problem about the general nature of truth; though, of course, there were problems about the nature of statement, or assertion, and the nature of belief. Now I think that in spite of all that's happened in the intervening time, I think Ramsey was right. The question what it is for a statement to be true, or a belief to be true, really admits of a simple answer, and the answer is this, that a statement is true if and only if things are as one who makes that statement thereby states them to be; and a belief is true if and only if things are as one who holds that belief thereby believes them to be.

Now, this rather trivial sounding formula has two great merits. For one thing, it admits of as many specific applications as you please. And again, on the other hand, it makes the point which Austin, I think, expressed by saying, ‘It takes two to make a truth’. For example, suppose someone says, or believes, that Caesar was bald, then what he says, or what he believes, is true if and only if Caesar was indeed bald. And here we have this twofold reference, reference, on the one hand, to a believing or a saying, and, on the other hand, to that in the world which the statement is about or the belief is about. This is twofold reference to the thought, on the one hand, and the world, on the other, and any adequate account of truth must allow for that.

But as I said at the beginning, Ramsey did acknowledge that there were plenty of problems in the vicinity which weren't so simply dealt with, and one of these was the problem of the nature of assertion. And I suppose one might regard current investigations into systematic semantics as an attack on this problem. That's to say, this is an investigation into the nature of those linguistic conventions in virtue of mastery of which we're able to say and to understand the true or false things that we do say or understand. Now, what I regard as misleading is to call the outcome of these investigations a definition of truth, as is fashionably done. For example, if somebody comes up with a systematic semantics for English, which nobody, of course, has in fact yet done, then it will be in this fashion to say that he's defined truth for English, or defined ‘true’ in English. But of course, there isn't one

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concept of truth for English, another for French, and another for Swahili, and so on, there's just truth. If the semantic theorist is to be said to have defined anything, then I could be ready to say that he's defined English, rather than he's defined truth.

[00:04:57] Evans: Well, I think on their behalf, I would concede that. It seems to me that the concept of truth has an application across languages, it has a wider range of extension than any of the terms they define. I wonder, perhaps slightly parenthetically, I wonder whether one can't, however, get some illumination from their ideas, from a Tarskian-style treatment, by trying to identify grammatical categories which are common to many languages, such as name and predicate, conjunction, negation, and so on, and trying to define truth recursively, something along the following lines. One might say you take the basic set of sentences which will be, let us say, names coupled with predicates, and we say that such a sentence of this kind is true if the item named by the name satisfies the predicate, or the predicate applies to it.

And then, for more complicated sentences, say, a negation, a sentence which consists of another sentence with a negation sign is true just in case that other sentence is not true; and so on with conjunction, and the other devices of sentential composition. It must be said that such a general application of this idea relies upon a primitive notion of naming, as I used it, and of satisfaction of predicates, but don't you think it gives us some illumination?

[00:06:22] Strawson: Well, I think it's an improvement on the language-relative notion of truth, but I still think that the concept of truth has a generality, which transcends, which goes beyond this typology of statement forms, just as much as it transcends differences of language. However, I think, in my turn I might make a concessive move here, and say that that title 'theory of truth' might well be allowed to include under it this sort of investigation of general statement forms common to all languages, and their relations. Now, I think this for two reasons, first of all, it seems clear that if it were not for language and the variety of statement forms that make up all languages, if it were not for language, truth really wouldn't amount to very much; and indeed, nor would thought amount to very much. The other reason – that follows on, perhaps – is that after all we have this grand title, 'theory of truth', and it seems rather a pity to confine it to the rather insubstantial Ramseyan formula.

[00:07:40] Evans: Well, very well, let's look at the possibility. We both agree we want a general account of truth and let's look if this Ramsey formula, that's to say the formula, 'He said something true just in case things are as he stated them to be', doesn't in fact capture this. Now, it seems to me there is a thin interpretation of this formula, which does. We understand this idea of things being in the world as someone states them to be as a general statement which we understand from many particular instances of the following form. 'He said that snow is white and snow is white', 'He said that grass is green and grass is green', i.e., we understand that so long as there is a filling that we can put, 'He said that the P and P', in that schema and to yield a truth, things are as he stated them to be.

That seems to me what I should call a 'thin interpretation', and it does seem to me that's utterly general. But there is a more substantial interpretation, which I can call 'the realist interpretation', which puts more weight upon the idea of things in the world being in thus and

such a condition. It seems that if we do put a weight on that it might not have the generality, the formula might not have the generality that it ought to have.

[00:08:58] Strawson: Could you say a bit more what you have in mind?

[00:09:01] Evans: Well, of course, this idea of things in the world being in such and such a condition is not the most perspicuous of notions. I mean, is it, one might ask, perhaps the distribution of elementary particles, and their organization and location, and so on. But, insofar as one has a grip upon the idea, it seems difficult to find things in the world which would make, say, mathematical statements true, or maybe some logical truths true. It seems that these – moral statements, too – the mathematical statements are difficult because it doesn't seem that there are things whose relations and dispositions make two and two plus four true. I mean, two plus two equals four true. In the case of say a moral statement, 'John ought to look after his mother,' it isn't that there's any lack of things. John and his mother are certainly there, but it's difficult to see in virtue of what relationship, if one takes a realistic idea of this, in virtue of what relation they must stand for the statement to be true.

[00:10:09] Strawson: Well, two things here. First, you raise the question about the condition of things in the world, or facts about the world, just how extensive is this, and you mentioned the relation of elementary particles. Well, I think we can construe it a little, indeed a great deal, more broadly than that. I think it might be allowed to cover facts about the disposition and relation of gross bodies, of ordinary physical bodies, facts about their sensible qualities. We have facts about people's states of mind. We have facts about social institutions and the rules that are accepted in them, or that constitute them, and the degree to which people's behavior represents compliance with these rules and failure to comply with them.

We really have an enormous range of types of fact, which fairly clearly fall under the rubric of facts about the world, or statements, or descriptions of how things are in the world, this crucial phrase. However, I must concede that though we can make this a very extensive range of facts, it's not so easy to include in it mathematical facts, as we are prone to call them, or the 'facts', if that's the right word, expressed by moral judgments.

But isn't it worth remarking that philosophers, precisely sensitive to the importance in this connection of the notion of condition of things in the world, or facts about the world, have been prone to reclassify mathematical formulae and moral judgments to refrain from calling them statements in the strict sense, true or false in the strict sense; have been inclined to reclassify them, to come to, say, moral judgments to assimilate them to imperatives, as Professor Hare notably does, and to treat mathematical formulae, logical truths, perhaps, with rules, to assimilate those to rules.

[00:12:24] Evans: Yes, but their propensity to do this illustrates, it seems to me, the power of this connection, between truth and things in the world having to be in such-and-such a condition. But this does seem to me an unacceptable consequence that we deprive these of appropriate bearers of truth and falsity; they're not statements. And I do put it as a virtue of this very thin interpretation, the Ramsey formula, that each of these fit. I mean, he said that two plus two equals four, and two plus two does indeed equal four. **[END OF PART 1]**

[00:00:00] Strawson: Well, now, how about this? Couldn't one say that truth in the primary sense is as conceived in the realist interpretation, the one which puts the weight it does put on facts about the world, the way things are in the world. This is truth in the primary sense. One who says something true in this sense, says how things are in the world, and what he says is true because things are in the world as he says they are. But, what we do, and intelligibly do, is to extend the word 'true', the notion of truth, and apply it to other utterances, which play a different role in our lives from that of stating or purporting to state how things are in the world. And we do this because the acceptability of those utterances depends on the truth of other things which are true in the primary sense. There's a kind of dependence of things which we call true in this extended sense on truth in the primary sense.

[00:01:15] Evans: Well, I see the programme. I see the idea of this extension. But you'll have to refine it, won't you, because there are a large range of things which we judge to be acceptable on the basis of truths in the primary sense, which I don't think even you would want to call true, such things as giving advice and commands. I mean, these we do evaluate in the way you suggest.

[00:01:39] Strawson: That's quite right, of course. And so I put it wrongly, or insufficiently clearly, let me try again. Let's take a mathematical formula, a simple one like 'seven plus five equals twelve'. Now, it's quite clear that this doesn't state how things are in the world. More specifically, it doesn't state what the results are of certain sorts of counting operations. For example, you might count one group of sheep and another group of sheep separately, and then count all of the sheep together. And if you do so, you would characteristically come up with a certain result. Now, it's certainly true that 'seven plus five equals twelve' doesn't state what this result is.

But the fact is that counting operations of this sort, not just on sheep but on millions of types of things, do regularly and characteristically have a certain outcome. This is a fact about the world, and because of this fact about the world, mathematical formulae and formulae of that sort have a certain utility for us, which they wouldn't have if these facts didn't hold. They enable us perhaps to *calculate* how many sheep there are in a certain field. They enable us to get from one set of truths about the world to another set of truths about the world. And in this way, they enter into, are entwined with other elements in our total belief system. Simple arithmetic cannot by itself tell me how much money I have in my bank account, but it can certainly help to work out how much money I've got in my bank account.

[00:03:29] Evans: Simple arithmetic maybe. I can see that this account might work for it, but mathematics can get quite refined. We have propositions about the irrational numbers, about non-denumerable infinities, and say in pure logic, we have propositions such as Gödel's incompleteness theorem. It's very difficult to see how quite these can be regarded as intertwined in that way.

[00:03:58] Strawson: Okay, so one has to admit that mathematics develops a sort of autonomy, that it develops its own criteria of acceptability, its own procedures of proof, and so forth. But this doesn't show that the links that I want to emphasize are severed. The links are still there, they're just less direct in cases like this, because there's no very straightforward application of highly sophisticated mathematics to the way things are in the

world in the way I illustrated in the case of a simpler arithmetical formula, but though the links are less direct, the links are still there.

[00:04:40] Evans: Well, I agree again that there are these differences. I can see the difference between demarcations to be made between fact-stating discourse in some primitive and prior sense and the mathematical discoveries. And not only do I see that these would be distinguished, I can see an order of development. I can see the order indeed you see. But it doesn't seem to me that the account of truth, the theory of truth, is the place to reflect these differences. It seems to me that we want an undifferentiated concept really. You remember you wanted – and you charged Tarski and others are systematic semanticists – you wanted an undifferentiated concept of truth, which applied, on the one hand, across languages and within a language across different statement *forms*. Well, I want an undifferentiated notion of truth which applies across different statement *contents*.

[00:05:41] Strawson: I see, but notice what happens, or what can happen, when somebody is devoted to your undifferentiated concept of truth. For example, instead of being prepared to accept my primary truth and secondary extensions, for example, in mathematics, what typically happens for somebody wedded to the notion of undifferentiated truth is that he, as it were, extends his notion of the world to keep pace with the undifferentiated notion of truth. Thus, he tends to invent or imagine a realm of timeless, perfect, immutable mathematical objects, the relations between which are reflected or mirrored in the truths of mathematics. What you get is in fact a Platonism in mathematics, an extension of the world to run along with mathematical truth. And indeed, you'll get the same sort of thing, though we haven't talked about this, in morality.

[00:06:48] Evans: You mean the sort of non-natural qualities that Moore talks about.

[00:06:51] Strawson: Non-natural qualities, exactly.

[00:06:53] Evans: But, of course, the undifferentiated notion of truth leads to these excesses – and I agree with you that they are excesses – only if it's a realist one. It seems to me that's one of the great merits of the thin interpretation that I have given of the Ramsey formula, that we can have an undifferentiated notion of truth, which doesn't have this consequence. We don't need objects whose states and relations [that statements are] true in virtue of.

[00:07:21] Strawson: I see, you wish to cling to the undifferentiated version of truth but reject any extensions of the realist picture that goes along with it?

[00:07:29] Evans: Exactly, yes.

[00:07:31] Strawson: Yes, well, now, let's see. There are two things it seems to me that we can agree about. First of all, we can agree about the coverage of the expression 'true' and of the notion of truth. That's to say, we can agree a word is used and correctly used not only of the honest to goodness empirical truths which reflect the way things are in the world, but it also has this further extension to cover mathematics, moral judgments, logic, and so forth. That we can agree on. And it seems to me there's something else that we ought, at any rate,

to agree on, namely, that this extensive coverage of the notion of truth is something that calls for explanation.

Now, it seems to me that the notion I've sketched at least provides the pattern of an explanation. That's to say the notion of primary truth, which is a matter of reflecting the way things are in the world, and then an explanation on the basis of this, of how we come to extend the notion into these other fields. Here is, not a full explanation, but at least the pattern, the project of an explanation; but it doesn't seem to me that you have offered one.

[00:08:47] Evans: No, no, I haven't, and I'm not in a position to do so. That's to say the demarcation of the class of truth-bearing utterances, or truth- or falsity-bearing utterances. I offer this just tentatively, I mean, the formula itself, 'He said that P and P', does impose a certain grammatical restriction, doesn't it? I mean, we can't get, 'He said that close the door and close the door'. I mean, that's going to do some of the work for us.

[00:09:18] Strawson: Yes, but the work which this grammatical test does is a work of *demarcation* and not a work of *explanation*. Incidentally, it doesn't even do the demarcation quite right, because there are typically constructions like the future indicative in English, for example, which would pass your grammatical test in that sentences in this tense and mood fit in, but sentences in this tense and mood are often used for giving orders, for example.

[00:09:52] Evans: What, what?

[00:09:53] Strawson: Well, you'll find this in army orders, company orders: 'A Company will parade at 10:30 tomorrow morning'. This isn't something up for assessment as true or false.

[00:10:04] Evans: It's not true if they do[n't].

[00:10:06] Strawson: Well, as on the board there, it's an order, not a prediction. So the grammatical test, for one thing, doesn't demarcate quite right. That seems to be trivial. More important is the point that at best you get a *demarcation* of the class of things that are true or false, and not an *explanation* of the extension of the coverage, the range of that class.

[00:10:32] Evans: Well, the only deeper suggestion I can make, and I concede that – I mean, in a way one could put the point also by saying how difficult it would be to identify the appropriate grammatical forms in a totally alien language, for example, one would have to look at it. No, the only suggestion I can make is and it's a gesture in the direction of belief, the idea, that's to say, that anything appropriately regarded as true or false is a proper object of belief. And indeed this might be used to distinguish assertions in a complicated way from commands.

[00:11:09] Strawson: Right. Well, I think that's better, in that it's not something purely formal, purely grammatical. The idea is that things which are true or false are proper objects of belief. My worry here is whether the obscurity, which surrounds the notion of the coverage of true or false, doesn't extend also to the notion of the coverage of belief. I think the current tendency to associate belief with action would not yield you an answer here. What would yield an answer, probably is something we haven't time to discuss. **[END OF PART 2]**