
Ethics and the Commitment to Truth

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ABSTRACT: Le società contemporanee hanno un carattere essenzialmente pluralista – esse sono fatte di una molteplicità di etnie, linguaggi e culture. Un tale pluralismo è senza dubbio uno dei fattori che hanno favorito la diffusa tendenza a ritenere i concetti di verità e di etica come irrilevanti o relativistici. Non possiamo però abbandonare né l'impegno etico né l'idea che in tale impegno dobbiamo guardare al di là delle nostre preferenze e convinzioni. L'impegno etico è esso stesso legato all'impegno per la verità, poiché l'impegno per la verità comporta non solo un riconoscimento delle pretese che noi stessi avanziamo nei confronti del mondo, ma anche delle pretese che il mondo ha nei nostri confronti. La verità richiede lo stesso riconoscimento e la stessa responsabilità nei confronti dell'altro che è al cuore dell'etica. Più che essere in conflitto con la pluralità, l'impegno per la verità e per l'etica è fondamentale per una reale possibilità della pluralità, così come per la possibilità di ogni politica propriamente democratica. Lavorare a un'appropriata considerazione della verità e dell'etica è dunque un compito significativo per la filosofia contemporanea: quel che qui si è cercato di fare è schizzarne le linee generali.

KEY WORDS: truth, ethics, pluralism, dialogue.

I. Contemporary western societies, one might even say contemporary societies as such, are essentially pluralist in character – they are made up of a multiplicity of ethnicities, languages and cultures. Nowhere is this more evident than in Australia, perhaps the most multi-cultural society in the world, but it is also particularly apparent in many European countries including the United Kingdom, France, Germany and Italy, as well as the United States. Such plurality and multiplicity is unlikely to be much diminished by moves over recent years, in the United Kingdom and in Australia, to impose some basic level of cultural uniformity through various forms of citizenship education or examination.

The pluralistic character of modern societies is undoubtedly connected to, although not wholly responsible for, a widespread tendency to view certain key concepts, notably concepts of truth as well as of ethics, as lacking any universalist application. Ethical and evaluative commitment, for instance, is often seen as dependent on communal or societal convention, while what counts as true is seen to vary with culture, discourse and language. Even many liberal thinkers of a more traditionalist bent, while rejecting any explicit relativisation, have reacted to the fact of societal pluralism by arguing for the importance of adopting a position of ethical and evaluative neutrality that effectively excludes issues concerning the truth of ethical or evaluative statements from the realm of the political. More radically, there are also some, including the late Richard Rorty, but also Gianni Vattimo, who view the very concept of truth as problematic and even dangerous, urging its abandonment in favour of a more open concept of conversational engagement.

Yet to what extent is any properly human engagement possible at all – even the engagement that consists in the leaving open of a space for others – without commitment, at some level and in some form, to an engagement with respect to questions of ethics and of truth? Surely one of the challenges of the contemporary world is indeed to articulate a sense of the ethical, and a sense of truth, that can be seen to make demands on us independently of our cultural or ethnic background, and yet which is nevertheless sensitive to the inevitable plurality of the world. The force of this challenge is not derived from some merely practical imperative, but instead comes from the absolute centrality of notions of ethics and truth in the very possibility of collective forms of life, and, more fundamentally, for the possibility of a human form of life as such.

Moreover, truth and the ethical turn out to be closely tied together. Ethics involves commitments that can be formulated as claims about the appropriateness of actions and decisions, as well as about the values that govern them and are expressed in them, and to make such claims is to assert the truth of what is claimed. This is, after all, in the nature of what it is to make a claim, irrespective of the sort of claim that it is. In addition, the making of such a claim – the very act of speaking – immediately draws us into the realm of the ethical through the role of the commitment to truth in such speaking. To speak is immediately to be implicated in a network of ethical concepts that themselves enable and support such speaking – including, at the most basic level, concepts of honesty, responsibility, and even trust.

The commitment to truth that comes with the very act of speaking thus reflects the commitment we have to others, as well as to ourselves, that are presupposed by our speaking (and are presupposed even when we seek to act

in ways that undercut our relations with others, or to act against them), and this commitment is surely at the core of ethical life – as well, one might say, as at the heart of the political. On this basis, the idea that, as Vattimo suggests in the title of one of his recent books¹, we can indeed say “farewell” to truth, is deeply problematic, since we can no more farewell truth than we can farewell ethics or politics². Moreover, if there is indeed a danger here, it comes, not from the continuing commitment to truth, but rather from our failure to appreciate its proper nature and significance – not from valuing truth too highly, so much as not valuing it highly enough. In the brief remarks that follow, I want, first, to explore the connection between truth and speaking in order to clarify certain key elements in the character of truth, including the relation between truth and the possibility of plurality, and, second, to explore the connection between truth and ethics in order to show the role truth plays in the very ground of ethics, and so in any proper response to plurality – including the plurality that is exhibited in the form of conflict or disagreement, as well as the plurality that is manifest in the possibility of conversation.

2. Truth is a concept that is implicated in our very speaking, and it is this general point that constitutes the essential first step in any examination of the role or nature of truth – or, indeed, in the exploration of the connection between truth and the ethical. To speak is already to take a stand with respect to truth – either through the claim to truth made in the speaking itself (a claim that may be true or false) or through the claim to truth implied by such speaking (so that even to command, to promise, or to plead is an act that takes place against an assumed background of things held true)³. It is the essential relatedness of truth and speaking, more so than the distinction between, for instance, truth and opinion (even justified opinion), that directs attention to what is most significant to any attempt to inquire into the nature and significance of truth, since it directs attention away from the impossible attempt to provide a definition of truth, and onto the more important matter concerning the *role* of truth,

¹ G. Vattimo, *Addio alla verità*, Roma, Meltemi, 2009.

² That there may nevertheless be a significant degree of common ground that lies between the positions occupied by Vattimo and Rorty and my own is something I will touch on towards the end of my discussion below.

³ We can thus argue that every non-declarative utterance always stands in relation to some declarative utterance – see D. Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2nd rev. edn., 2001, ‘Moods and Performance’, pp. 109-121.

the way in which it connects *with other concepts*, and the human *practices* with which it belongs⁴.

The necessary tie between truth and speaking and truth underlies the obvious difficulties that afflict certain attempts to speak *about* truth – a difficulty most clearly evident in the so-called “truth paradoxes”. Such paradoxes usually involve a self-referentiality that requires the same sentence to be apparently both truth and false at the same time, and they include not only the paradoxes such as that of the liar in its various forms (“All Cretans are Liars, Epimenides the Cretan tells you this”), but also the paradoxes that arise on the basis of attempts to assert the relativity or irrelevance of truth. The relativist, for instance, in asserting the relativity of the truth of a statement to some social or conventional context thereby asserts both the truth and the potential falsity of that very claim, since, by its own account, the claim concerning the relativity of truth will be true in some contexts, but false in others. Similarly, if one attempts to assert the irrelevance or dispensability of truth, one must at the same time assert the irrelevance or dispensability of the truth of that claim. The significance of these paradoxes is not that they provide any “knock-down” argument against opponents of truth (they do not), but rather that they demonstrate the essential interconnection of truth with speaking. The moral is that if one wishes to relativise or to reject truth, one is best advised not to try and state it.

The way truth is connected to speaking itself has major implications for how truth must be understood – although they are implications that have often been neglected or ignored. At the most general level, it means that truth is not some “metaphysical” concept that points us to an eternal realm beyond human interests or out of reach of human abilities, but instead refers us back to the very realm in which we speak and in which we act. There is, then, no such thing as “the Truth” against which we measure ourselves or to which we vainly aspire. While we can talk of truth, as Heidegger does, in terms of the unconcealing of things that is also the opening up of worlds, this is not a usage that refers us to a “truth” that goes beyond human speech and action, but is rather intimately connected to it. The Heideggerian account concerns,

⁴ It was characteristic of Davidson’s approach to the question of truth to abjure precisely the attempt to define truth – see his comments in, among other discussions, Id., *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, cit., ‘The Folly of Trying to Define Truth’, pp. 17-36.

⁵ See M. Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, ‘The Essence of Truth’, pp. 136-154 – the account of truth set out here is, of course, developed in many other places in Heidegger’s work.

in fact, that which is the proper ground for the truth that is evident in speech and action⁶.

One way of putting the general point at issue here is to say that there is no body of truths to which “truth” refers that are eternal and unchanging. Inasmuch as it is our speaking that is true and false (at least in the ordinary sense of the term), so whether any particular instance of speaking is true or false is a contingent matter – although it depends, as Davidson has emphasised, on just two things, on what the words as spoken mean (which inevitably involves what others take those words to mean, and not only what we might mean by them), and on the way the world is arranged⁷. Thus, as language changes, and as the world also changes, so too may the truth of what we say change along with it. If one wishes to find some relativity in respect of truth, then this is all the relativity one should expect to find – and it is a relativity of a quite innocuous and (mostly) unremarkable sort. “Truth” does not name some mysterious and ineluctable property or entity, but instead refers to the particular form of interconnectedness that obtains between instances of speaking – between particular sentences, utterances or statements (which themselves express particular attitudes or orientations while also standing in a relation to particular instances of non-linguistic behaviour) as they are spoken by individual speakers within a community of speakers, and between such speaking and the world in which that speaking occurs.

The form of interconnectedness at issue here is one that can be elaborated in terms of notions of consistency, coherence and correctness – although these notions cannot themselves be given content independently of the no-

⁶ In ‘The Essence of Truth’, Heidegger argues that it is a mistake to suppose that truth belongs in the first instance or solely to statements (see, *ibid.*, p. 142). Such a claim is quite consistent, however, with the idea that there is nevertheless a sense of truth that does attach to statements. In fact, Heidegger’s argument in ‘The Essence of Truth’, and elsewhere, is precisely that the idea of truth as attaching to statements itself presupposes the idea of truth as unconcealment. Heidegger actually proposes two concepts of truth, one of which is a condition for the other, but in so doing cannot be said to eliminate the other. Moreover, while the idea of truth as unconcealment opens up the space in which statements can be both true and false (it opens up the space for the operation of truth as it applies to statement), this does not, *pace* the claims of Ernst Tugendhat (see E. Tugendhat, *Heidegger’s Idea of Truth*, in C. McCann [ed.], *Critical Heidegger*, New York, Routledge, 1996, pp. 227-240), invalidate the claim that it is indeed truth that is at issue here – not only can Heidegger retain both the idea of truth as ‘unconcealment’ alongside the idea that there is a distinction between true and false statements, but one can also show how these two senses are connected, and why the first might indeed be referred to as a form of ‘truth’. From a Davidsonian perspective, the latter point is evident, although it requires further explication, in the idea that truth inheres in our ‘beliefs’ as a whole, and that this is indeed presupposed by the possibility that any specific belief might be true or false – see the final chapter of J.E. Malpas, *Donald Davidson and the Mirror of Meaning*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 230 ff.

⁷ See, D. Davidson, *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2001, ‘A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge’, p. 139.

tion of truth. This reflects the essentially holistic and “externalist” character of content. Meaning thus depends upon truth – just as truth depends upon meaning – in the sense that for some utterance (or any attitude, action or artefact) to be meaningful is for it to be embedded within a larger context of meaning (a larger body of utterances, attitudes, actions and artefacts belonging to a community of speakers), as well as within the all-encompassing framework of the world (meaning thus depends upon a level of both rational and causal connectedness)⁸. The combination of holistic and externalist elements in the formation of meaning is itself reflected in the dual character of truth as encompassing both elements of coherence (the truth of a sentence depends on the way the sentence connects to other sentences – on its meaning) and of correspondence (the truth of a sentence depends on the way the sentence connects to the world – on what it asserts of the world and the way the world is)⁹.

Much of the difficulty that attends discussions of truth derives from a tendency to treat both truth and meaning as transcendent of the actual context of communicative and interpretive practice. Yet truth and meaning arise only in that context – apart from it, neither truth nor meaning can even appear. This is precisely the point behind Heidegger’s well-known claim that “before Newton’s laws were discovered, they were not ‘true’”¹⁰: truth is dependent on Dasein¹¹, or, as Davidson puts it, “nothing in the world, no object or event, would be true or false if there were not thinking creatures”¹². To understand truth in this way – which is neither to relativise it in the usual way nor to dismiss it – is to understand truth as emerging only in the space that is opened up between interlocutors in their engagement with one another and with the world around them. It is here, of course, that the Heideggerian notion of truth comes back into play, for it is the opening up of this essentially plural space that Heidegger calls the happening of the truth of being, *aletheia*, and that is also the happening and gathering of world, *Ereignis*¹³. The Heideggerian emphasis on this opening up of the place of truth as both plural and also unifying reflects the character of truth (and so meaning or content), in its more

⁸ There is a larger theory of meaning that is implicated here – see, for instance, J.E. Malpas, *Donald Davidson and the Mirror of Meaning*, esp. chapter 2, pp. 28-43.

⁹ See Id., *Donald Davidson and the Mirror of Meaning*, esp. pp. 260 ff.

¹⁰ M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson, New York, Harper & Row, 1962, H. 226.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² D. Davidson, *Truth and Predication*, Cambridge Mass., Harvard University Press, 2005, p. 7.

¹³ See my discussion of both these notions in J.E. Malpas, *Heidegger’s Topology*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2006, pp. 186-189, 213-219.

mundane sense as both holistic and externalist in character (that is, as encompassing both coherence and correspondence).

At this point it becomes quite clear that far from being incompatible with a commitment to truth, the idea of a pluralistic society actually depends upon such a commitment. Only within the sort of space that Heidegger describes, and to which Davidson's work, in a rather different way, also draws attention, can plurality appear as even a possibility. The point can be put quite simply in terms of the idea that conversation, and the engagement that comes with it, cannot occur in a situation in which there is no common space in which to engage – whether because of the absence of such a space or our unwillingness or inability to acknowledge or to participate in it¹⁴. Thus Paul Ricoeur, while emphasising both the unity and differentiation that occurs within the concept of truth, also insists that “the spirit of truth is to respect the complexity of the various orders of truth, it is the recognition of plurality”¹⁵.

In seeking to relativise truth, then, or in seeking to dispense with the concept, we effectively attempt to deny or to set ourselves apart from that open, and yet common, space in which real engagement and conversation is possible, and in which alone can the fact of plurality appear. It is thus that both Gadamer and Davidson have insisted that agreement precedes disagreement – although the agreement at issue here has to be understood as precisely the agreement that consists in our being already given over to the world, and our involvement in it, and so also our being given over to a concern with, and commitment to, truth¹⁶. Our very being in the world is thus a being in relation to truth at the same time as it is also a being in relation to others.

3. Is it possible to speak on the assumption that nothing that one says involves a claim to truth, or in which the claim to truth is constantly effaced (whether by relativization or simple denial)? The liar paradox shows that the idea of universally false speech is impossible since it undermines the grounds of its own saying¹⁷. To speak is indeed to make a claim to truth, or to presuppose

¹⁴ It is this space that Arendt also refers to as “the space of appearance” – see H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1998², pp. 199 ff.

¹⁵ P. Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, trans. Charles A. Kelbley, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1965, ‘Truth and Falsehood’, p. 189.

¹⁶ This means that the agreement at issue here, while typically formulated and articulated in terms of certain sentences that are agreed to be true, does not reside in our agreement about any particular set of such truths. It is, in fact, an agreement that consists in our common engagement in and responsiveness to the world. On the nature and role of agreement as it appears here, see my *What is Common to All: Davidson on Agreement and Understanding*, in Jeff Malpas (ed.), *Dialogues with Davidson: New Perspectives on his Philosophy*, forthcoming.

¹⁷ Interestingly, this is a point that applies not only to the universal liar, but also to the universal skeptic. Universal skepticism – the idea that all or most of our beliefs could be false – is

such a claim, even though the truth that is claimed is always something finite, limited, and contingent – a truth tied to the circumstances of our own situatedness in the world no less than it is tied to the act of speaking as such. Moreover, in the interconnectedness of truth with speaking, truth is also exhibited as standing in an intimate relation to the ethical – and while this may already be thought to be indicated through the connection between truth and plurality, it is also something worthy of further examination.

A key element in the way truth connects to speaking, at the most basic level, is through the idea of speaking as itself involving a claim to truth – a claim that cannot, and does not, carry its own certainty with it. Truth is thus not something over which we have final authority or control, but is rather that in the sway of which we already stand. Truth refers us to the character of the world as going beyond us, as involving more than we ourselves are, more than we can know, more than we can determine. In making a claim to truth we already move out into the world in a way that also opens us to the world, freeing ourselves up in a way that enables our engagement with the world, in a way that makes us vulnerable to the demands of the world, and also, of course, to the demands, to the claims, of others.

What appears at this point – and so the domain into which the inquiry into truth moves us – is nothing more nor less than the very ground of the ethical as such. Indeed, the ethical could never take shape without this idea of a relatedness between self and other – and not merely between the self and the other person, the ‘face’, as in Levinas (although this is clearly an in-eradicable element in any fully developed conception of the ethical), but also the “other” that appears in the form of the world. Ethics is here exhibited as being tied to finitude, and to the recognition of finitude, as well as to respect for, and understanding of, the proper role of truth as itself essentially bound up with that recognition (even though this may not always be given explicit articulation). Indeed, the ethical failure that is evident in the refusal to acknowledge or to respond to the claims of others is often itself accompanied by a refusal to acknowledge or to respond to the claims of the world – a refusal to acknowledge or to respond to the possibility of error, of failure, of limitation. In this respect, Heidegger’s insistence, throughout his work, on the fundamental role of questioning, while not expressed in these terms, can nevertheless be seen as articulating what is an essentially *ethical* commitment – even if it is an ethical commitment that is so fundamental that it is seldom recognized as such.

the epistemological counterpart to the liar paradox. Like the idea of the universal liar, skepticism is itself paradoxical, refusing even the knowledge of its own speaking, leaving itself nowhere but silence or an utterance whose intelligibility is always uncertain.

The idea that there might be such a close and essential connection between truth and ethics is not without precedent, nor is it restricted to the philosophical perspective that derives from a solely European sensibility. It is central, for instance, to Gandhi's idea of *Satyagraha*, the way of truth, as both a mode of life, and of political practice, that provides the surest counter to social and political oppression¹⁸. Gandhi's position might be construed, in fact, as expressing what is actually a quite deep and widespread understanding of the connection between truth and ethics, the widespread character of which may itself be indicative of the fundamental nature of the connection between truth and ethics in the possibility of any properly "human" form of life. The understanding of truth at issue here is one that is evident in such everyday ethical concepts as those of honesty and integrity, and it is also evident in the idea, already alluded to in Heidegger, of truth as connected with the notion of "real" or "genuine" appearance – that which is as it appears and appears as it is, that which shows itself in itself. In Gandhi, this is manifest in the fact that the term *Satyagraha* already contains within it a reference to *what is*¹⁹ – the way of truth for Gandhi is thus also the way of being, we might even say, it is being, although we must be careful as to exactly how this is understood²⁰.

Gandhi provides a salutary instance of the role truth plays in ethical articulation and conduct, and in underpinning resistance to illegitimate authority – the concept of truth is, in fact, essential to being able to make sense of the very notions of legitimacy or illegitimacy. Without a sense of truth, and a commitment to truth, we cannot formulate any notion of resistance other than as purely oppositional, as oppositional without foundation, as oppositional in a way that is itself in danger of becoming authoritarian. Indeed, wherever we find resistance to oppression, the refusal of subjugation, the enacting of dissent, so we also find the claim to truth inevitably being called upon as the only weapon that can be deployed short of the resort to violence.

This is not to say that truth will not also be called upon to give legitimation to authority, even to tyranny, but this is because any authority requires more than just the authority it gives itself – it must look beyond itself for its own authorization. It is in the denial of this requirement or its obfuscation

¹⁸ See Gandhi's discussions of *Satyagraha* in *The Essential Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, ed. Raghavan Iyer, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 222-236, 301-346.

¹⁹ Gandhi writes that "The word *satya* is derived from *sat*, which means that which is. *Satya* means a state of being" – *ibid.*, p. 231.

²⁰ Gandhi himself declares the truth is God – "Instead of saying that God is Truth, I say that Truth is God", *ibid.*, p. 233.

that authority becomes authoritarian²¹. There can be no doubt that the claim to truth is itself the claim to or the assertion of a certain authority – thus Arendt writes that “from the viewpoint of politics, truth has a despotic character. It is therefore hated by tyrants”²² – but the authority possessed by truth is not an authority that first resides in any individual or group. The claim to authority is, indeed, always illegitimate when it attempts to exert power over truth itself – in doing so the claim to authority attempts to determine that which cannot be determined by it, since truth is not that over which authority can be claimed, but rather that in which authority is founded. Truth always retains its autonomy and its authority with respect to the claims made in relation to it – whether they be everyday claims of factual assertion or claims regarding power and right.

The Gandhian emphasis on ethical conduct, and especially the resistance to oppression, as based in the commitment to truth is a notion that, in its general form, appears in a wide range of contemporary contexts. The Quaker call to “speak truth to power”, first formulated in this way in the 1950s²³, is one that has a continuing resonance in the face of many forms of contemporary injustice, and has been so frequently repeated that its original source is often forgotten. In 2005, the playwright Harold Pinter, made an impassioned call for truth in politics, condemning the actions of the United States government (and the United Kingdom) over Iraq as well as in other matters, and declaring that “to define the real truth of our lives and our societies is a crucial obligation which devolves upon us all”²⁴.

Whether in Iraq or Guantanamo Bay, in Palestine, Burma or Tibet, the appeal to truth remains a key element in the possibility of critique, of resist-

²¹ This denial is one that George Orwell identified as lying at the heart of totalitarianism. Thus, in the interrogation and torture of Winston by the Party functionary O’Brien that occurs nears the end of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, O’Brien asserts the absolute power of the Party to determine even what is true and false – see G. Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1954, pp. 197-217. See also my discussion: J.E. Malpas, *Lying, Deceit, and the Commitment to Truth: On Ethics in Contemporary Public Life*, «International Journal for Applied Philosophy», 22 (2008), pp. 1-12 – this essay approaches many of the issues also addressed in the present discussion, but from a different perspective.

²² H. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1993, ‘Truth and Politics’, p. 241.

²³ American Friends Service Committee, *Speak truth to power: a Quaker search for an alternative to violence: a study of international conflict*, Philadelphia, American Friends Service Committee, 1955. While the pamphlet itself suggests that the phrase has a much longer history (a claim that has often been repeated since), there is no clear evidence of the existence of the phrase in Quaker circles, or elsewhere, before its use by AFSC members in the 1950s.

²⁴ H. Pinter, *Art, Truth and Politics: The Nobel Lecture*, London, Faber and Faber, 2006, p. 23. While Pinter’s address stands out, the sentiments it expresses are not exceptional – Pinter is one of many who have spoken out against the “avoidance of truth” by supposedly democratic governments over recent years.

ance, and also of restitution. Indeed, where the issue is one of responding to past evils in a way that will re-enable communities and societies, the formation of “truth and reconciliation” commissions around the world, both at national and community levels, provides a striking instance of the indispensable role truth plays here²⁵. Restorative justice practices, of which truth and reconciliation commissions are sometimes seen to be an example, also give a central role to truth in addressing and redressing wrongdoing through their emphasis on the need for the acknowledgement of harm or conflict as a necessary first step in the possibility of transformation and reconciliation²⁶.

Central to any properly ethical mode of life, as well as to a truly democratic politics, is the keeping open of a space for others. This is just what is at issue in the idea of plurality – a plurality that obtains even within the collectivity of a single community or society. It is such plurality, and with it the possibility of dissent, that is itself one of the main targets of the attacks on truth that have been so common within modern political life. In this respect, while contemporary societies do indeed seem to exhibit an essentially pluralist character, it is a plurality over which governments seem constantly to attempt to exercise control and to restrict. Truth is itself dependent on the keeping open of such a space of plurality, and on holding open the possibility of a multiplicity of voices. It is only within such a space that claims to truth are open to challenge – only within such a space can alternative claims to truth be advanced, can the need for justification arise, can the lie and the falsehood be shown for what they are²⁷. In its own turn, however, plurality can itself be protected only where there is respect for truth, since only when we take seriously the fact that our speaking is indeed a claim *to* truth, and yet not a claim *over* truth – and so already invokes the possibility of other such claims as well as demanding attentiveness to them – is there the open space, the “leeway”,

²⁵ Some twenty-four countries, including South Africa, Peru and Algeria, have employed such commissions, while they have also been used to address more localized issues in the United States and elsewhere (e.g., the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission was formed in Greensboro, North Carolina, in 2005, to address issues relating to the 1979 killing of five marchers taking part in a rally against the Klu Klux Klan and the American Nazi Party). The way truth and ethics operate in the practice of such commissions is not, however, always straightforward – see, for instance, R.I. Rotberg – D. Thompson (eds.), *Truth v. Justice: the morality of truth commissions*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000.

²⁶ There is a burgeoning literature on restorative justice practice, but for a useful overview of issues and approaches see Dennis Sullivan – Larry Tifft (eds.), *Handbook of restorative justice: a global perspective*, London, Routledge, 2006.

²⁷ It is thus that within contemporary social epistemology, diversity and dissent are increasingly seen as key elements in deliberation and the development of knowledge – see, for instance, Alison Wylie’s introduction to the special issue of «Episteme: A Journal of Social Epistemology» on the topic of “Epistemic diversity and dissent” (A. Wylie, *When Difference Makes a Difference*, «Episteme: A Journal of Social Epistemology», 3,1, 2006, pp. 1-7).

that allows other voices to come forth, and in which they may even be said to be brought forth²⁸.

To speak is to take a stand with respect to truth. To attempt to speak in a way that would disregard this, or that would attempt to subvert it, is to act in way that is destructive of the very preconditions that make the act itself possible, and so threaten to disrupt the entire domain of speaking, as well as of human engagement. This is the basis for the ethical importance of truth-telling (and the practices associated with it – including, for instance, promise-keeping). It is an ethical importance that derives from the central role that truth plays in the possibility of speaking, but also in underpinning human sociability and collectivity. Even the lie or the falsehood is possible only to the degree that it remains nested within a practice of honest assertion, and is located with respect to a body of truths.

There is thus, one might say, an ethics of speaking that centers precisely on the concept of truth, and around which are clustered other key ethical concepts such as those of honesty, trust, responsibility, loyalty and so on²⁹. Yet truth itself calls upon ethics, is entangled with it, such that rather than understand the commitment to truth as simply a matter of commitment to the utterance of certain sorts of sentences, the commitment to truth should rather be seen as itself the commitment to a certain practice – a certain comportment, a certain mode of life – that both expresses and sustains our commitment to ethics as such. The commitment to truth implies the commitment to the ethical, but the commitment to the ethical is itself a commitment to truth.

4. According to Richard Rorty “the meanings of normative terms like *good*, *just*, and *true* have been problems only for philosophers. Everybody else knows how to use them, and does not need an explanation of what they mean.” Moreover, he adds that while he is “perfectly ready to admit that one cannot identify the concept of truth with the concept of justification or any other... that is not a sufficient reason to conclude that the nature of truth is

²⁸ It is worth noting that the dependence of plurality on the commitment to truth (which is, in any case, a reciprocal dependence) does not imply any real limitation of the extent of plurality. Insofar as truth can be said to operate as a limit, then it does so not by marking a line between different kinds of speech (thereby setting a limit within the possibilities of speaking), but rather by opening up the domain within which speaking occurs (establishing speaking in its very possibility). The domain in question here has no “outside”, and there is nothing “beyond” it. It is this same sense of limit that Heidegger refers to in *Building Dwelling Thinking*, in Id., *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter, New York, Harper & Row, 1971, p. 154.

²⁹ The values at issue in this ‘ethics of speaking’ – values that also underpin forms of collectivity more generally – do not admit of variation, although they will inevitably be instantiated in different forms according to differences in the social and cultural contexts in which they are instantiated.

an important or interesting question³⁰. These comments are significant, not only for their conjoining of truth with two key terms of ethics, nor even for their seeming acknowledgement of the *sui generis* character of truth, but also because of the manner in which philosophy itself is drawn into what is at issue here. On one reading, what Rorty objects to is not the idea that truth has a significant role in human speaking and acting, but rather that the explanations of truth offered by philosophers might have any significance of their own. If the argument that I have set out in the pages above is in disagreement with Rorty on this point, it is largely because it adopts a different conception of what philosophy can or should be, of what it can and should do.

It might be noted – for some it might even be a point of criticism – that nowhere in the above discussion have I attempted to provide a definition of truth. Indeed, I have explicitly asserted, following Davidson, the impossibility of such a task. This does not only reflect a view concerning the nature of truth, but also about the nature of philosophical inquiry. Properly understood, philosophy is not the attempt to give univocal definitions to contested terms; it is not about the erecting of some metaphysical certainty that will finally bring our questioning to a halt; and nor is it merely a continuation of scientific practice by other means. Philosophy, or perhaps we should say, the fundamental thinking in which philosophy essentially consists, is nothing more nor less than the constant turn to questioning itself, to its own grounds, and therefore also to the questioning of ourselves. Such questioning itself lies, as should already be evident, at the heart of both the ethical life as well as the concern with truth. It does not aim at the simple uncovering of more truths, but rather at enabling our own capacity to engage with truth, to engage with the world, and to engage with ourselves, both individually and collectively. To the extent that philosophy fails in this, then it also fails as philosophy.

The exploration of the nature and role of truth that I have attempted here is thus, I would contend, of a very different kind from that which Rorty labels as lacking in importance or interest. If that is so, then it may also indicate that the position I have set out here need not, after all, be seen as so far removed from Rorty's position, or even Vattimo's, as may first appear. Where we agree is in our rejection of the idea of truth – or of any normative concept – as disconnected from communicative engagement and practice. Where I differ, at least from Rorty, is in holding that in relation to such matters philosophy can still occupy a significant role in contemporary discourse. That role is one that consists in returning us to the central issues that must concern

³⁰ Richard Rorty in R. Rorty –P. Engel, *What's the Use of Truth?*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2007, p. 45.

us – issues that can only be addressed in the original context in which they arise, in the midst of our real engagement with one another, in the midst of the genuine concerns and problems that confront us, in the midst of our own fragility and finitude. It is a role that Rorty's own work continues to embody, as does Vattimo's, and as such, it continues to exemplify a certain commitment to questionability, and so also to truth.

Philosophy can only function as philosophy when it returns us to the original place out of which the impetus to questioning first arises, in which truth first appears as an issue, in which we first encounter ourselves as well as others. To find oneself situated in this way, which is to find oneself already in the world, is both to be given over to making a claim upon the world – to be given over to action, to decision, and to speech – and to be subject to the demands that the world makes upon oneself. The space of the ethical, which is a space opened up only in the world, is the space between self and other, between self and self, between self and world. It is this very space that is the space of truth, not only in the Heideggerian sense that this is the space that first enables the possibility of speaking – as well as of action and decision – but also in the sense that it is that to which our speaking always returns us through the character of such speaking as itself a claim to truth. Plurality and conversation, far from being opposed to truth, thus already presuppose it, and far from being a source of danger, truth turns out to be that which guards us and protects the possibility of human sociability and collectivity. Without it, there is no properly human mode of life, no properly responsive or ethical mode of engagement; without it, there is only isolation, only silence.

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