CHAPTER 2

Notions of Truth in Philosophy

What I propose to do in this chapter is to describe the main notions of truth that have featured in Western philosophy since its beginnings in ancient Greece. Four of these notions appear most frequently in contemporary theory, both philosophical and psychoanalytic. These are the Correspondent, Coherent, Intersubjective and Pragmatic notions of truth (Hanly 1990; 2001; Kunne 2003; Lynch 2001). To these I add one classical notion, the Ideal truth, presented already by Plato. This truth is often considered obsolete outside religious context, but I will illuminate its enduring relevance in psychoanalytic theory and practice. I add also the Subjective-Existential truth, which like Intersubjective truth, is often associated with the postmodern critique of truth.

The rationale for adding Subjective-Existential truth to my paradigmatic notion of truths is twofold. Firstly, by being associated with postmodernism, it is often considered as radically contemporary and nihilistic to the point of lacking use-value. Presenting its historical-philosophical roots in continental philosophy, I will re-examine its validity and enduring relevance. Secondly, this truth appears in explicit and implicit ways in psychoanalytic theory and practice, reflecting its immense influence on psychic life. It is therefore important to establish its ties and relations with the other accepted notions of truth.

First I present each notion of truth in the context of its relevant epistemology. After this, I will move from the philosophical to the psychological realm, investigating the mental correlates of these truths and their mode of function within our psychic, experienced lives. I will show how each truth creates a point of certainty in the subject’s life and addresses a basic dimension of living and a profound human need.

Six Notions of Truth

Examination of the history of ideas allows the identification of six paradigmatic notions of truths that frequent philosophical, linguistic and clinical theory: Ideal, Correspondent, Coherent, Intersubjective, Subjective-Existential and Pragmatic truths. Each of these reflects a discrete and definable epistemology that is associated with the work of a number of thinkers. For simplicity, I associate my truth notions with, respectively, the works of Plato, Aristotle, Baruch Spinoza, Edmund Husserl, Soren Kierkegaard and William James.
In developing my perspective, I will examine the manner in which, throughout history, those who investigated truth fell within one of the above paradigms.

The Ideal and the Correspondent truths are absolute in the sense that their definitions presume and incorporate an order of reality that is independent of consciousness or human history. The four other notions entail an essential softening of the truth (Hempel 1935\1994) in the sense that they involve particularity, historicity and contextuality. I will present them in an intertextual manner, showing how each notion involves a critique of former definitions. I do not do this only for style or clarity, but rather in order to bring to the fore the interrelations between the various notions and the neglected or problematic aspects that prevent each notion from being conclusive.

**The Ideal notion of truth:** Plato developed his ideas in the context of two different schools of thought with whom he engaged throughout his dialogues: Pythagorean and Sophist philosophy. The former was actually a religion, based on the belief that mathematical formulas, which are essentially concepts or ideas, accurately describe the true or essential nature of all things. The sophists were a heterogeneous school, but I will bring Protagoras here as their representative because he held views which were in direct opposition to Plato’s. A key text attributed to him is ‘Truth’, which opens with the sentence: “Man is the measure of all things, of the things that are that they are and of the things that are not that they are not”.1 This is interpreted as a claim of the relativity of the truth of all judgments to the experience or belief of the individual making the judgment. In other words, the way things really are is, in fact, the way they seem to an individual. This logic is the one governing subjective epistemology, an epistemology that understands reality and truth as constituted by the subject's perceptions and beliefs.

Plato’s theory of forms may be seen as an extension of Pythagorean thinking and as debating the relativistic stance of the sophists. Originating in Plato’s work, the Ideal notion of truth posits that truth values stem from the compatibility or lack thereof between an ideal form and its empirically perceived particular cases. According to Plato, all true ideas or forms originate from The Good or The Form of the Good.2 This form is superior to all others, indeed it is

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2 At Republic vi 508E-9a, the Form of the Good is distinguished from all other objects of knowledge: “Now, that which imparts truth to the known and the power of knowing to the knower is what I would have you term the idea of good, and this you will deem to be the cause of science, and of truth in so far as the latter becomes the subject of knowledge; beautiful too, as are both truth and knowledge, you will be right in esteeming this other nature as more beautiful than either; and, as in the previous instance, light and sight may be truly said