1. Introduction

My talk tonight is a story about truth, but it may or may not be a true story. I'll leave that for you to decide. An alternative title for this talk is: *A Brief History of Truth: Confessions of a Platonist*, although my views about truth are Platonic in spirit at best, not in the details. More on that later, but first a bit of personal history, and then I'll pick up the story.

I became drawn to philosophy slowly and almost unwittingly in my teenage years in Australia, and when it came time to go to university I think I surprised myself almost as much as my parents when I declared that I intended to major in philosophy rather than something eminently more sensible such as law. One day in my late teens or early twenties it struck me that truth is at the heart of metaphysics, and for me metaphysics was, and remains to this day, the heart of philosophy. I sensed that there is a deep and fundamental but elusive connection between existence and truth, and finding out how to join the dots between the two has been an abiding interest of mine ever since. My conviction that there *is* a fundamental connection between the two has been a guiding light in my philosophical thinking and it underlies much of my original thinking in this talk.

Given its relatively small population, Australia had in those days, and for that matter continues to have, a fairly high profile in the world of English-speaking academic philosophy. This fact is not all that well-known other than among professional philosophers and fans of Monty Python (sometimes those two groups seem to be one and the same, but that's another story). A distinctive characteristic of twentieth-century Australian academic philosophy, particularly the work emanating from the University of Sydney, was an enduring pre-occupation with metaphysics, which is an interesting phenomenon in as much as it has run very much against the grain of most of the rest of English-speaking philosophy. It's no coincidence that the late Princeton philosopher David Lewis was a frequent visitor to Australia to collaborate with philosophers at the University of Sydney. Lewis was famously unfashionable for his extravagant metaphysical system, according to which infinitely many other worlds exist, each one every bit as real as ours. Far-fetched as this idea may seem, it has a respectable antecedent in Leibniz, who realized it is a very useful solution to metaphysical problems of necessity and contingency, and it has reappeared in recent decades in the context of quantum theory, although quantum many worlds are very different from Lewis's worlds, which he claims is what we are referring to when we use sentences called *counterfactuals*. Lewis found sympathetic audiences in Australia, but the Harvard philosopher Hilary Putnam echoed a widely-shared disregard for the Lewisian-Australian axis when he complained that this was pursuing philosophy as if Kant had never existed. I'll return to this later and explain what Putnam meant. My point in mentioning it here is simply to disclose that my willingness to take metaphysics seriously is no doubt a reflection of my Australian background. Now back to the story.

2. The Ancient Greeks: Reality Rules

Starting with an historical overview and painting in very broad brushstrokes, I want to briefly characterize three main eras in the history of Western philosophy. According to what has now become a familiar narrative, philosophy in the Western tradition emerged in pre-Socratic times in the Eastern Mediterranean with a series of thinkers who took the audacious step of proposing original, general theories about the nature and origins of the world. I will not go into detail here about those philosophers and their theories, of which our knowledge is in any case only highly fragmentary at best. I do, however, want to draw attention to a common theme among the theories of these so-called Pre-Socratic philosophers, namely that they were preoccupied with identifying a primal *Ur*-element, or *archē*, from which everything originates or is constituted (although in the case of some Pre-Socratics it was a small group of elements). One candidate for the *archē* was the eponymous *apeiron* itself, a chaotic, primal, formless void that Anaximander took to be the *Ur*-element. For the most part, Pre-Socratic theories of the *archē* focused on material substances, although there were notable exceptions, such as Heraclitus, who emphasized the role of concepts such as flux, conflict and change, concepts that were much later to feature prominently in a movement now known as *process metaphysics*. Distinctions between disciplines such as cosmology, cosmogony, the sciences and philosophy had not yet emerged at the time of the Pre-Socratics. They didn't differentiate in their thinking between these disciplines, in effect pursuing all of them at once in their search for a general theory of reality. As interesting as the Pre-Socratics are in their own right, the claim I want to make here is that in theorizing about the nature of world, they were simultaneously theorizing about the *true* nature of the world. As far as I know there is no reason to suppose that the Pre-Socratics differentiated between the two.

The diverse and original Pre-Socratics created a fertile intellectual backdrop for the sophisticated Athenian philosophy that followed in the golden age of ancient Greece. The nature of reality was still centre stage in the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, but the range of their philosophical interests built upon and expanded that of the Pre-Socratics, encompassing fields such as ethics, political philosophy, aesthetics, mathematics, causation, epistemology, and more. Plato's philosophical works spanned decades and his thinking evolved significantly over the course of his early, middle and late writings, so much so that it is difficult to encapsulate his philosophy concisely or definitively. For our purposes, however, Plato's most significant insights were the idea that reality as we experience it directly is not the same as what is ultimately real, and his controversial theory of Forms, according to which what is ultimately real comprises a realm of ideal, intangible, abstract entities. These objects, or Forms, have powerful explanatory power, and in my view Plato's theory was in many respects profound and ingenious. Of particular philosophical interest are the Forms of Beauty, Justice, and, reigning supreme over them all, the Good, a hierarchy Plato argued for in glorious prose in the *Republic*, perhaps his greatest single work. However, the exact nature of the relationship between Forms and the particular objects and properties in the world of our experience is something he never quite managed to articulate satisfactorily.

Plato did not leave behind a clearly articulated theory of truth in his writings, but evidence that he was acutely aware of its importance is found in his argument that knowledge is justified true belief. Some commentators have ascribed to him a correspondence theory of truth—I'll explain what this is later—but that is an open question. Before leaving Plato and the ancient Greeks, I want to briefly discuss a related issue: *rationalism*. Rationalism holds that reason, as opposed to sensory experience, is the source of real knowledge, and similarly that the criteria for truth are intellectual and deductive, rather than empirical. By virtue of his theories (for example, those concerning Forms and the ideal society), and his philosophical methodology, Plato has long been the most famous poster child for rationalism, and in recent decades also the most famous scapegoat for all that is regarded by postmodernists and others to be what is misguided about that tradition. For example, Nassim Nicholas Taleb complains about Plato's rationalism at length in his recent bestseller, *The Black Swan*. But why the backlash, and is it justified?

In specifying *reason* as the royal road to truth and knowledge, rationalists place supreme confidence in certain human cognitive capacities, such as our ability to draw inferences, identify laws of logic, recognize necessary truths, and so on. It's not that we are necessarily infallible, but for rationalists, reason and human intellect can win out in the end. Moreover, rationalists such as Plato hold that we are able to eventually divine ultimate truths about the world provided that our philosophizing is rigorous enough. But there are severe problems with all this for many modern critics. First, the very idea that creatures such as us, with all our imperfections and limitations, presume to be able to acquire ultimate knowledge of the nature of the world smacks of arrogance and hubris, or perhaps a quaint naivety at best. Moreover, rationalists take for granted that the world itself is objective, real and comprehensible. Abandoning these assumptions makes a mockery of human reason and our aspirations for it, but some or all of them are rejected as unwarranted assumptions by the critics, who have no misgivings about bidding adieu to the rationalists' dreams of intellectual grandeur.

So what are we to think? Are the critics right? Well, maybe. Note that rationalism as a philosophical method does not, in and of itself, imply that we necessarily *will* arrive at ultimate truth, only that reasoning is the way to get us there *if that goal is indeed attainable at all*. Let us call this position *weak rationalism* (as opposed to the more presumptuous *strong rationalism* of Plato). The comprehensibility of the world is different from its objectivity, however, and giving up on the former is very different from giving up on the latter. I will argue that truth and the objectivity of the world are inseparably connected, and that to give up on objectivity boils down to giving up on truth itself, or at least on any truth worth having. The great medieval philosopher-theologian St Thomas Aquinas makes this connection explicit in his dictum: *Veritas est adaequatio intellectus et rei*, which roughly translates as: *truth is the adequacy of the intellect to things*. In other words, truth is a matter of the extent to which our minds match up with, or correspond to, the world, assuming that for Aquinas, 'things' is shorthand for an independently existing, objective reality. Another passage by Aquinas clearly supports this interpretation; he writes: *Real things participate in the act of being of the Creator God who is Subsistent Being, Intelligence, and Truth*. Here "real things" and "truth" are

explicitly equated via God, whose existence for Aquinas is objective and independent of us. In a sense, then, truth resides in objectively existing things themselves, a conception of truth I support and which I refer to as *ontological truth*. Where I depart from Aquinas, however, is that for me there is no need to factor God into the picture. This brings to a close my discussion of the first of three historical periods, which for what are now hopefully obvious reasons I entitled *Reality Rules*.

3. The Rise of Epistemology and the Retreat from Reality

Although they do so in very different ways, two figures represent what I call the epistemological era that I want to talk about next: Descartes and Kant. Descartes is generally regarded as a Rationalist, and justifiably so. His mathematics and much of his philosophy clearly identify him as one of history's greatest contributors of truths of reason, fully in line with the rationalist tradition, but he was also an important transitional figure in Western philosophy, heralding an entirely new approach to philosophy in his famous *Meditations*, in which he adopted a first-person voice and a very much an existential sensibility. In beginning with nothing more than the standpoint of the here and now, he bravely attempted to abandon all pre-conceptions in an effort to arrive at absolutely certain knowledge. As slight as the first two *Meditations* are, their influence was profound and continue to be far-reaching. One of the central messages they convey is this: *do not begin with metaphysical assumptions and preconceptions about what exists; forego all of that, begin with immediate experience, and build upon nothing but immediate, first-hand experience with the greatest care and parsimony so as to avoid making any faulty philosophical assumptions.*

While other great rationalist philosophers such as Leibniz and Spinoza were still to come, the retreat from reality was underway, and it gained added impetus from one of Western philosophy's greatest figures, Immanuel Kant. Although his moral theory was profoundly rationalist in spirit, Kant's epistemology and metaphysics seriously undermined whatever aspirations humans may have cherished to be know it alls. Kant made a crucial distinction between the *phenomenal* realm—that is, the world as it appears to us in experience—and the *noumenal* realm, the world as it is in itself. The phenomenal realm is given intelligible structure by Kant's famous categories, which include space, time and causation. These categories in effect *constitute* perceived reality, to invoke a Kantian term; they are fundamental and essential aspects of our psychological makeup. This meant that he saw us as being *participants* in the construction of perceived reality via cognitive faculties that are distinctly and specifically human. If these cognitive faculties, however, belong to the phenomenal realm but not the noumenal realm, this in turn means that we can have no real grasp of the latter whatsoever. We are trapped within the phenomenal world, and unfortunately for us, we cannot simply leave our categories and the world of phenomena behind and apprehend the world as it is in itself. That door is slammed shut, and along with it access to an ultimate, mind-independent reality eludes us. So now we are finally in a position to appreciate why post-Kantian Western philosophers such as Putnam by and large turned away from metaphysics.

In the wake of this epistemological turn in Western philosophy, philosophers increasingly turned inward, training their attention on questions such as: *What is it possible for us to know?* and *What are the scope and limits of our knowledge and of our apprehension of the world?* Along with the retreat of objectivity and external reality, so the pursuit of objective truth waned, understandably so. Recalling Aquinas's definition of truth as adequacy of the mind to the world, if our access to the world as it really is slips from our grasp, then the criteria we need to establish the adequacy of our mental representations to the world also slip from our grasp. Again, the problem is that we are doomed in the sense that we have no access to anything outside our heads. Distinctions between the world and the world of our minds collapsed for the German idealists that followed Kant, subjectivity and subjective truths assumed greater prominence, and while some metaphysical system building did persist into the nineteenth century (most notably that of Hegel), this was basically how the philosophical landscape stood at the dawn of the twentieth century.

4. The Linguistic Turn and Analytic Philosophy

Over time, the trend toward a focus on the mind, knowledge and the limitations of both finally focused attention on our primary means of communicating thinking and knowledge: namely language. Analytic philosophy was born in the early years of the twentieth century with the reaction by British philosophers, notably Bertrand Russell and G.E. Moore, against the prevailing German idealism of the time, but it had roots in the earlier work of the German logician Gottlob Frege. The central concerns of this movement can be summed up as follows: *What does an analysis of language reveal about its scope and limits, and how does language hook onto the world?* This movement signaled a turn against the subjectivity of the idealism it replaced, but it left the issue of objective reality largely untouched.

As for truth, analytic philosophers and philosophers of language abandoned ontological truth in favour of construing truth as an artifact of language. Rather than considering truth to be some sort of abstract, metaphysical concept, analytic philosophers ask questions such as: *How does the word "truth" function in language?* And *What is a truth bearer; in other words what are the linguistic vehicles of notions such as truth?* Closer consideration of how we use phrases such as "it is true that" and "is true" in ordinary language reveals that a primary role of such expressions is to function as predicates which indicate our agreement with statements that make claims. For example, consider a simple sentence such as this: "Calgary is in Alberta." If we want to affirm the truth of this sentence, we may say: 'The sentence "Calgary is in Alberta" is true.' Instead of taking truth to be a matter of figuring out how our beliefs and utterances match the world, analytic philosophers take the work of a theory of truth to be to provide an adequate account of the *predicate* "is true". It might seem at first that this project should have been relatively tractable and should have simplified matters, but this approach soon ran into complications because of some of the subtleties of language, especially the fact that languages manifest a capacity for self-reference. Self reference arises both at the level of *sentences* within a language referring to themselves (for example, *This sentence contains five words*), and in the way *speakers* of languages can refer to themselves. The famous Liar Paradox is a case in point. If a Canadian says "All Canadians are liars", what are we

to make of the truth of what the Canadian says? The problem is that a paradox sets in as soon as a Canadian says: '"All Canadians are liars" is true'. Efforts to resolve this difficulty tend to revolve around the idea of invoking a hierarchy of languages, such that one no longer talks about truth *within* a language (called the *object language*), but only in another language, a *metalanguage*. While this device works from a technical perspective, it is highly contrived and ordinarily we have no other reason to invoke such an artificial distinction such as this.

Before moving on to other topics, one last word about the issue of what qualify as *truth bearers* in analytic philosophy. So far I have been loosely referring to these as sentences or statements, and for some philosophers that is good enough, but Frege and many contemporary logicians insist that abstract entities called *propositions* are called for in this regard. Propositions, which Frege called *thoughts* (although this terminology is unhelpful) are rooted in ordinary declarative sentences, but the idea is that propositions transcend sentences in ordinary language and encapsulate the logical essence of what those sentences express.

There are a variety of reasons for taking propositions seriously. Among them is the fact that we can make essentially the same claims using sentences in different languages (for example, *I am a man, Ich bin ein Mann*, and *Je suis un homme*), and in variant formulations within a single language (for example, *You are a nice person*, and *A nice person is what you are*). But more importantly, propositions are extremely useful as a way to explicate *meaning*. Explaining exactly how it is that words and sentences acquire meaning is one of *the* central concerns of the philosophy of language, and is as deep a problem as any in analytic philosophy. To get a sense of the difficulties here, consider what would seem at first to be a fairly tractable aspect of this problem, the connection between ordinary objects and common nouns. Now it would seem that a straightforward way to do this is *ostensively*; that is, making the connection clear by pointing to an object while saying or writing out an appropriate word. For example, I say "chair" while pointing to a chair to teach someone such as a child or non-English speaker the meaning of that word. The first person to do this for a given word requires a kind of *linguistic baptism* to take place (as in "I now pronounce thee "chair"), but once the connection catches on, we are off to the races. Or are we? Try using this technique to teach the meaning of words to a cat or a dog. All they will do is sniff the end of your finger. They don't get it, and the reason they don't get it is that they need a prior understanding of the meaning of pointing in order to get the point of your pointing. In other words, ostension *relies on* the prior possession of a theory of meaning about pointing, and so ostention cannot serve as a basis for *explaining* meaning. What we have here is a classic Catch-22.

Because they are abstract, mental objects, propositions help get around this problem and take us a step back in the direction of elevating truth above the mundane world of ordinary language. But even so, the ontological status of truth and of propositions themselves still needs to be made clear, and so we are not much further ahead after all.

5. Two Theories of Truth: Correspondence and Coherence

The remarks I have made so far about truth in analytic philosophy merely scratch the surface of what modern philosophers have had to say about the topic. There are other theories and alternative viewpoints about truth, but two I want to talk about briefly are a couple of the more influential theories: the correspondence and coherence theories. The correspondence theory is fairly simple to state. Aquinas talked about the fit between the mind and the world, and the correspondence theory is similar, except that the fit in question becomes that between language and the world. What is it for a sentence such as: "Canada borders on the United States" to be true? It hinges on whether what the statement says is actually the case in the real world. If it *is* the case, then the sentence is true, and if it isn't the case, the statement is false. That sounds simple enough. Note that the correspondence theory makes no appeal to truth predicates, and it seems to make sense. The problem with it, however, is similar to the problem that Kant left us with. Just as we can't get outside of our heads to compare our phenomenal world of experience with the world as it is, so too there is no way we can independently verify whether our sentences correspond to the world, because our sentences and the world are all, so to speak, inside our heads. What we would need is an external, third party to verify the status of the correspondence. A God's eye point of view would do the trick, but that viewpoint is unavailable to us, and this is where the correspondence theory breaks down.

Another approach is to view truth holistically as comprising the internal consistency and coherence of our worldview as it is expressed in language. According to this conception of truth as coherence, we approximate truth to the extent that our overall worldview is serviceable based on the criteria of internal consistency and coherence. A belief that tigers are harmless would not cohere well at all with the rest of our beliefs and observations about the behaviour of large, carnivorous felines, and so we would consequently tend to reject it. Coherence has a ring of pragmatism to it in its willingness to forego the absoluteness of truth for a conception of truth as being whatever maximizes the overall sense of what we believe, but not everyone (me included), finds this account satisfactory. There are many political and religious ideologies that have a great deal of internal coherence. For example, Marxists view the world through a Marxist lens and that is sufficient for them, Islamists do the same with Islam, and so on, but should we conclude that these different systems are on an equal footing with respect to truth? There is a cautionary saying comes to mind here when we consider powerful but potentially misleading ideologies: *If the only tool you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail*. That said, when combined with the correspondence theory, the concept of coherence becomes more plausible and powerful. The coherence and coherence theories are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and indeed can be taken as complementary, as Quine recommends. He writes: *the coherence aspect has to do with how to arrive at truth…the correspondence aspect has to do with the relation of truths to what they are about* (1987: 214).

6. Natural Languages, Formal Languages, Syntax and Semantics

So far we have discussed only natural language, but it turns out that some very interesting and powerful insights into truth emerged in the twentieth century from a study of formal languages (the symbol systems found primarily in logic, mathematics and computer programming). Whereas natural languages tend to abound with oddities including ramshackle spelling, quirky grammar, and endless exceptions to capricious rules, formal languages are precise, custom tools devised for specialized purposes. Generally speaking, both informal and formal languages embody two main elements: *syntax* (the rules determining whether symbols strings in the language are well-formed), and *semantics* (the associations we bestow to the symbols and strings to give meaning to the language). Syntax and semantics work hand in hand, and in natural languages determine why, for example, the syntactically random string: *"bird red the is"* makes no sense (as opposed to: *"the bird is red"*, which makes perfect sense to English speakers); and why Chomsky's sentence: *Colourless green ideas sleep furiously*, while syntactically well-formed, makes no sense given our understanding of *ideas*, *colours*, *sleep*, and so on. Rules of syntax are even more critical in formal languages, a point very familiar to anyone who has ever experienced the frustration of witnessing their computer program fail due to single miniscule error such as a missing character.

A fascinating feature shared by natural and formal languages is that they can all be reduced to just two symbols, which is all that is needed to represent every letter, punctuation mark, variable, character, and space that a language needs. Morse code comes close, reducing them to just three symbols: *dit*, *dash*, and *space*, but strictly speaking only two are required. In the machine languages of computer science, by convention the two symbols are "0" and "1", but it doesn't matter what we use for these bits, as long as there are two of them. For the languages of classical logic, semantics can be reduced to two concepts as well. We assign statements (or theorems) of a mathematical language such as arithmetic, for example: *1+1 = 2* or *1+1 = 3*, exactly one of two truth values, *true* and *false*. (Sidebar comment: while we normally consider it to be *false*, *1+1 = 3* is indeed a theorem of arithmetic, but *only if* arithmetic is inconsistent. Needless to say, that is a very big *if*.) So the semantics of formal languages take us back to truth, which underlines the crucial importance of the link between truth and language.

A fascinating result dating back to the early 1930s concerning truth in formal languages was Kurt Gödel's famous *Incompleteness Theorem*. Gödel proved that formal systems that are at least as powerful as arithmetic are what we call *incomplete*, which means that they are capable of generating true statements—the mathematical term for them is *theorems*—that the system cannot prove. In other words, the truths generated by a formal system outrun the ability of such a system to prove its own truths. As it turns out, the key to Gödel's proof, which came as a surprise to logicians and mathematicians, is that, as basic a language as it is, arithmetic is capable of exhibiting *self-reference*. The details of Gödel's techniques and proof are beyond the scope of this talk, but two implications of this proof are of special interest for my talk. The first is the incompleteness of truth itself, which implies that there is a sense in which we can never fully circumscribe truth. The second is that truth in a formal language capable of exhibiting self-reference cannot be

defined within that language; truth must be defined outside the system. I will return to these points in the final section of my talk.

7. Truth-telling and Truthfulness

In this next to last section, I digress briefly to discuss a couple of other important senses of the notion of truth as we ordinarily understand it, namely *truth-telling* and *being truthful*. When we take the witness stand in a courtroom, we swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. The imperative to tell the truth and to be entirely truthful weighs heavily on us in the courtroom, and the legitimacy of our testimony has a major bearing on the efficacy of the entire courtroom process. Typically, though, events at a crime scene move quickly; there were shouts, footsteps, a flash of light, shadowy figures, a few loud bangs, maybe more. Our memories fade and play tricks on us, but nevertheless we are expected to explain in detail exactly what happened, in the correct sequence, and without any disconcerting gaps in our narratives. Lives may well depend on the veracity of our testimony.

The legal process, with its requirement that witnesses testify truthfully to the court, hinges on the assumption of objective reality, the notion that there are indeed objective facts of the matter as to what happened in the case being prosecuted, facts that the testimony of all the witnesses will ideally converge upon, like pieces of a puzzle, inexorably fleshing out the one and only one version of what happened. That's how courtroom dramas on television play out, but how often does courtroom testimony play out this tidily in the real world, and just how realistic is the expectation of convergence on one and only one true story? Everyone brings his or her unique background and prejudices to the witness stand, memories, especially dim, distant ones, are notoriously unreliable, and on top of all this there is often the added pressure of hostile cross-examination. Regardless, the important thing to note here is our reliance on the assumption itself. Lady Justice herself may be blind, but everyone else is expected to have their eyes wide open, be fully cognizant of all the relevant facts, and contribute consistently to the reconstruction of the exact same version of the truth about the case in question.

Truth-telling in personal relationships is a little different. Here the emphasis is not so much on objectivity but on *honesty*. We ask each other for honesty about ourselves and about each in our close interpersonal relationships, and we typically identify honesty and truthfulness as highly desirable characteristics in the partners we want for long-term relationships. Closely related to the concept of truth-as-honesty are the notions of authenticity, personal integrity, and the desideratum of being true to oneself, although according to psychologists, total honesty in our personal relationships is hardly commonplace, which on reflection should not come as a big surprise. After all, remarks such as: *"Actually, yes, that outfit does make you look fat"*, will definitely not endear us to our significant others, how matter how earnestly we might try to rationalize such a comment by appeals to absolute honesty as a defense. Everyone loves a straight shooter, it seems, as long as nobody shoots *too* straight *too* often, or when straight shooting isn't actually what is wanted. The lesson for us here is that whatever we might profess to each

other about wanting and expecting truth and honesty, it turns out that often these virtues turn out to be social inconveniences. This is why white lies are far more normal in the politics of interpersonal relationships than most of us care to admit.

8. Back to the Future: Truth and Reality

I began this talk discussing the Pre-Socratics, Aquinas, and the idea that truth is ontological, meaning it is objective and somehow inherent in the world rather than being merely a matter of what we think. I pursue this theme in the final section, picking up on some of the themes I have raised throughout the talk. Along with its companion, objective reality, objective truth clearly fell on hard times in recent times. As we have seen, the epistemological and linguistic turns in Western philosophy took a heavy toll on it, as did the later emergence in academe of the so-called post-modern movement, represented by figures such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. So what is the status of the notion of objective truth, and what are its prospects?

First, note that however unfashionable it may have become among philosophers and other academics, objective truth still exerts a powerful grip on the popular imagination, for example in the context of real world situations such as courtroom trials, as I pointed out in discussing how the assumption of objective truth is absolutely essential in that context. This grip extends even as far as areas such as fiction. For example, just a my name is Phillip, not Dave or Fred, we are adamant that the name of Sherlock Holmes's assistant was Watson, not Smith or Jones. So in at least some important senses, objective truth never really went away. But what about the future of truth in philosophy itself?

In my view, Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem will one day in hindsight prove to have done much to restore truth to its status of objective and independent existence. Before pressing this point, however, I need to pause and underline an important caveat about Gödel's result. He did indeed prove that arithmetic is incomplete with respect to truth, but if and only if the system of arithmetic itself is consistent (that is, free of contradiction). So far we have not discovered any internal inconsistency in arithmetic, nor do we expect to find one, but there are certainly no guarantees in this regard. If we do make such a discovery, arithmetic will instantly collapse in a heap, as any and all arithmetic statements will be provable, including $2 + 2 = 5$; $4 – 3 = 219$, and so on. The inconsistency of arithmetic, needless to say, is a mathematician's worst nightmare. The important point to bear in mind here is that the incompleteness of arithmetic with respect to truth depends on the consistency of arithmetic. If we grant that it is consistent, however, we have firm grounds for believing that arithmetic alone guarantees that truth is endless, in the sense that if we tried to make a list of all truths, it would be impossible to get to the end of the list. The impossibility of getting to the end of the list is a matter of pure logic and has nothing to do with running out of resources such as paper or pencils. This in turn implies that truth outruns not only arithmetic but us as well, and if this is so, then truth is independent of us. As Patrick Grim puts it in the title of his book about Gödel's theorem, ours is *The Incomplete Universe*. It is no coincidence that Gödel himself was a Platonist when it came to the philosophy of mathematics, and so although it may not have been in a way that Plato and Aquinas would have imagined, then, we

have come full circle. Objective truth is still very much alive and out there. If we are lucky, our minds might be adequate to truth to some modest extent, but that is a matter of indifference from the perspective of truth itself.

Truth and language are vast and subtle topics, as I hope this talk has made apparent, and I can't help thinking that still more discoveries about both await us in the future. How vast and subtle is truth? I really don't know the answer to that question, nor can I be *expected* to know given the very argument I have advanced in this talk, which is that there is more to truth than you and me and all of us put together. I cannot prove that truth is open-ended or objective, and I don't believe anyone else can, either. From the vantage point that we occupy, that is to say our minds, we don't have the perspective required to know whether truth is objective. Belief in the objectivity of truth is basically a matter of faith, and the perspective that is required is, as it were, a God's eye point of view. The alternative to accepting the objectivity of truth as a matter of faith is that it is subjective, dependent upon us, and in my view that does not leave us with a conception of truth worth having.

All that aside, I'd like to leave you on a different note with a quote attributed to the great physicist Niels Bohr, who is said to have claimed that while the opposite of a true statement is a false statement, the opposite of a profound truth is another profound truth. The following examples illustrate Bohr's point. The first is from the great Edwardian-era writer G.K. Chesterton, who wrote (please excuse the sexist language of the day):

> *There are some people, nevertheless—and I am one of them—who think that the most practical and important thing about a man is still his view of the universe. We think that for a landlady considering a lodger, it is important to know his income, but still more important to know his philosophy. We think that for a general about to fight an enemy, it is important to know the enemy's numbers, but still more important to know the enemy's philosophy. We think the question is not whether the theory of the cosmos affects matters, but whether, in the long run, anything else affects them!*

I happen to think this passage is beautiful and contains a profound truth, but here is another viewpoint:

> *Atheism, Catholicism, animism, agnosticism, Mormonism, Islam, and on and on ad infinitum: They don't really matter in themselves because the bottom line is that it's not what you believe that matters, but how you live. The practice or use of any belief system can be good and moral or evil and destructive.*

While this perspective is completely different from Chesterton's, it also contains a kernel of truth. And with that, I will end my talk and thank you for listening.

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