

L. AUSTIN'S AND JOHN R. SEARLE'S CONCEPTION OF TRUTH*

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ABSTRACT. *John L. Austin's and John R. Searle's Conception of Truth.* One of the oldest and most accepted theories of truth is the correspondence theory of truth. I argue that both John L. Austin and John R. Searle accept the correspondence theory of truth, and I present the theory accepted by them. I also present the implications of the acceptance of this theory of truth in relation to their philosophy of language.

Keywords: *truth, theories of truth, the correspondence theory of truth, philosophy of language*

Introduction

Two conditions have to be fulfilled in the case of a valid inference: a formal and a material one. The formal condition is defined as the correctness of the inference as a process; the material condition refers to the truth of the premises. Merely considering this quasi-definition of a valid inference, we find ourselves in the midst of the problem of truth.

Charles W. Morris differentiates between three dimensions of semiosis: the syntactical, the semantical and the pragmatological dimension¹. Since we define language as a particular example of a sign system, we also differentiate among these three dimensions. We tend to believe that the problem of truth is a question which concerns logic. This view, however, is false. Logic is not concerned with truth; it focuses on the logical inference, more precisely, on the validity of the logical inference. Although we speak about logical truth, we do this in a formal sense. Logical truth is true regarding its form;² hence the denomination: formal logic. Following Morris's division, in the case of

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¹ Cf. Charles W. Morris, "Foundations of the Theory of Signs", in Otto Neurath, *International Encyclopedia of Unified Science*, Vol. I, No. 2, The University of Chicago Press, 1944, 6.

² Cf. Theodore Sider, *Logic for Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, 2010, 2.

logical investigations we are in the field of syntax, that is, we examine the relations among signs. The relations among signs are based merely on form. They lack content. Bertrand Russell underscores the lack of content in formal sciences when talking about mathematics as a formal science. (Formal logic is considered to be the substratum of mathematics.) He claims that mathematics is a science, in the case of which we don't know what we are speaking about, and whether that particular object that we speak about is true or not.³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, in his *Tractatus*, – sentences 4.461⁴ and 5.142⁵ – also draws our attention to the lack of content in formal logic.

Let us consider Noam Chomsky's famous sentence: "Colorless green ideas sleep furiously."⁶ From a grammatical, that is, a syntactical point of view, the sentence is well-formed. According to the rules of grammar, the words are in their places, in a grammatically correct relation with each other. Still, there is a problem: we do not understand the sentence. The sentence does not have a meaning. But when speaking about meaning we are not concerned with syntax anymore, but rather with semantics. In this latter case, the form is filled with content. In the case of a semantical approach, the main issue considered is the relation between the signs and the things denominated by the signs. To quote Ch. W. Morris: "Semantics deals with the relation of signs to their designata and so to the objects which they may or do denote."⁷

Graham Priest, making a reference to Gottlob Frege, affirms: "At the heart of a theory of meaning for language is a theory of truth. This claim is not contentious. It arises from Frege's observation that to give the meaning of a sentence is to give its truth conditions."⁸

Among the theories of truth, the correspondence theory of truth is the most widely accepted one. The traditional version of the theory can be traced back as far as Plato⁹ and Aristotle.¹⁰ The essence of the correspondence theory of truth can be epitomized as the correspondence between the world and those statements describing the world. Thus, according to the adherents of the correspondence theory of truth a statement is

³ Cf. Bertrand Russell, "Mathematics and the Metaphysicians", in Bertrand Russell, *Mysticism and Logic*, George Allen & Unwin, 1959, 75.

⁴ "Propositions show what they say: tautologies and contradictions show that they say nothing. A tautology has no truth-conditions, since it is unconditionally true: and a contradiction is true on no condition. Tautologies and contradictions lack sense. [...]" Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Routledge, 2002, 41.

⁵ "A tautology follows from all propositions: it says nothing." *Ibid.* 47.

⁶ Noam Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures*, Mouton de Gruyter, 2002, 15.

⁷ Charles W. Morris, *op. cit.*, 21.

⁸ Graham Priest, *In Contradiction*, Oxford University Press, 2006, 56–57.

⁹ Cf. Plato, *Sophist*, 262e–263d.

¹⁰ Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1011b.

true, if and only if the things asserted in the statement correspond to a certain fact. For example: the statement 'Snow is white' is true, if and only if snow is white.*

The two most illustrious representatives of the correspondence theory of truth in the twentieth century were the aforementioned Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein. For Russell and Wittgenstein the basis of the correspondence theory of truth was the structural isomorphism between the world and the language. The standpoint of the structural isomorphism theory presupposes that the structure of the world and that of the language is identical. Therefore, the relation between the world and the language is characterized by a one-to-one correspondence: an element of the language corresponds to an element of the world. In a Wittgensteinian style, we could say that the language maps the world similarly as a map maps or represents the geographical reality corresponding to it. According to this theory, deciding on the truth of a statement supposes, on the one hand, that we analyse the statement (a linguistic entity); on the other hand, that we analyse the facts corresponding to the statement (a non-linguistic entity). As a third step, we compare these two entities. A statement will be true, if and only if the statement describes the facts as they are in the world. We can thus say, that a statement will be true, if those asserted in the statement correspond to the facts. By accepting the structural identity of the language and the world on the one hand, and the role of the language to represent reality on the other hand, both Russell and Wittgenstein set out such a theory of correspondence, in which the correspondence between the statements and the facts almost excluded the possibility to err. This type of correspondence made it impossible for a fact not to correspond to a statement.¹¹

Besides Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein, in his article entitled *Truth* John L. Austin also argues for the correspondence theory of truth. However, Austin's correspondence theory of truth differs from the theory of truth accepted by the logical atomists. Austin does not explain the correspondence between the world and the language with the help of structural isomorphism, but with that of convention.

At the very beginning of his article, Austin makes it clear that truth relates solely to statements or assertions. Although it is widespread to consider sentences as true, according to Austin, only statements can be said to be true or false. For Austin, sentences are the media, through which we formulate our statements; he defines statements as historic events which are said by a speaker to a listener, making reference to certain historic state of affairs. The term 'historic' does not have to confuse us. Austin does not want to suggest that we cannot formulate such statements which refer to the future.

* Single quotation marks are used to differentiate between quotations and words/expressions/sentences of the object language. The latter are enclosed in double quotation marks.

¹¹ Cf. Susan Haack, *Philosophy of Logic*, Cambridge University Press, 1978, 93–94.

He uses the term in its logical sense: to make the time of the utterance of the statement explicit.

According to Austin, linguistic communication presupposes symbols (the speaker communicates with the hearer by means of these); a world (the speaker formulates statements about this world); and similarities and differences between things (these similarities and differences make communication possible between the speaker and the hearer). In addition to these, there are two conventions:

Descriptive conventions correlating the words (= sentences) with the *types* of situation, thing, event, &c., to be found in the world.

Demonstrative conventions correlating the words (= statements) with the *historic* situations, &c., to be found in the world.¹²

The core of Austin's theory of truth is the descriptive convention and the demonstrative convention. These two conventions lead us to Austin's definition of truth. According to this definition "[a] statement is said to be true when the historic state of affairs to which it is correlated by the demonstrative conventions (the one to which it 'refers') is of a type with which the sentence used in making it is correlated by the descriptive conventions."¹³

According to Austin's theory, if we consider the statement "The cat is on the mat", we can say the following: the descriptive convention will mark out those types of situation in which a cat is on the mat, while the demonstrative convention will set out that particular situation, in which a certain cat – the one that we can point at, if we need to – is on the mat. So, the descriptive convention determines the frame, or the type of situation, the demonstrative convention determines the particular, or as Austin would put it, the historic situation.

At first sight Austin's theory of truth seems quite clear. After a more thorough examination however, the theory does not appear solid enough; it can be too easily criticized. Benson Mates for example is one of the critics, who underscores the problematic feature of the theory.¹⁴ If we go beyond Austin's example, he says, we will face certain problems concerning the definition of the descriptive convention, i.e. the reckoning of certain situations among certain types of situations. This way, for example, it can be problematic whether a rainfall is already or still considered a rainfall. It is not clear, what is considered the standard situation in case of a rainfall. Of course, the difficulty of defining the descriptive convention entails the difficulty of deciding whether a certain

¹² Cf. John L. Austin, "Truth", in J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock, *Philosophical Papers (by the Late) J. L. Austin*, Oxford University Press, 1961, 89–90.

¹³ *Ibid.* 90.

¹⁴ Cf. Benson Mates, "Austin, Strawson, Tarski, and Truth" in Leon Henkin, *Proceedings of the Tarski Symposium*, American Mathematical Society, 1974, 394.

statement is true or false. The definition of the standard situations itself already poses difficulty. While a clear-cut definition of the standard situations would be necessary in order to decide on the truth of the particular historic events, this latter decision seems virtually impossible to make. Considering all these, the criticism of Benson Mates seems relevant in respect to the obscurity of Austin's theory of truth.¹⁵ But these are not the only problems that Austin's theory has to deal with. Austin's theory can neither handle the problem of negations, nor the problem of quantified sentences, and it cannot decide about the truth of sentences describing past events. The problem is similar in all three situations: the demonstrative convention cannot be used, because we cannot point out a specific situation in these cases. Austin's theory of truth can only account for indexical sentences.

After a short presentation and criticism of Austin's theory of truth, we have to mention its strengths, too. The positive point of his theory of truth lies in the thought that sets him apart from the logical positivists. It seems, that because Austin rejects the idea of a structural identity between the world and the language that describes the world, he also eliminates the criticism that Russell's and Wittgenstein's theories of truth encounter. Austin explains the relation between the world and the language with the help of convention. According to him, while analysing the problem of truth, the choice of our word with which we refer to the things in the world is irrelevant. What is relevant is the following: a sentence is considered to be true, if according to the descriptive and the demonstrative conventions the language describes the world as it appears. The view of the structural isomorphism assumes so tight a bond between the language and the world that it almost makes it impossible to err. The weaknesses of Austin's theory of truth on the other hand show that it is quite possible to make errors. The possibility of making a mistake first occurred when trying to define the standard situations with the help of the descriptive conventions. And the situation becomes even more complicated, when trying to apply the demonstrative convention, thus reckoning concrete situations among standard situations.

At the end of his article, Austin draws our attention to a mistake. Because of logic's too big of an influence, the view that a statement can either be true or false has too long prevailed in the history of philosophy. Because of this, philosophers thought, that to every statement one of the truth values can be assigned. In other words: statements were only considered to be descriptive. Austin has challenged this view. He argued that not every statement is descriptive. There are statements in case of which the question of truth and falsity does not even arise. Such examples are: mathematical formulae, value judgements, sentences of fiction or the performatives. In the case of

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 395.

these sentences – let us call these sentences utterances – the requirement of being true cannot be imposed on. As a result of this, he concluded, that not all statements are descriptive statements. By recognizing this fact, Austin initiated the *speech-act theory*.

The initiator of the speech-act theory was John L. Austin, but John R. Searle elaborated on it. In his work entitled *Speech Acts* Searle formulates the following thesis: “[...] speaking a language is performing speech acts, acts such as making statements, giving commands, asking questions, making promises, and so on; and more abstractly, acts such as referring and predicating [...]”¹⁶ Searle’s thesis outgrows from Austinian roots. Like Austin, Searle also differentiates between non-descriptive and descriptive utterances.

We define descriptive utterances as utterances which describe the state of the world. Descriptive sentences have a single aim: to describe the state of the world according to reality. This is called the teleological view of sentences. According to this view, whenever we formulate a sentence, our purpose is to produce a true sentence. But what does it mean to formulate a sentence? And what makes a sentence to be true?

Searle’s standpoint about the truth is clear. I will try to present a short version of his theory, part of which grew out from his critical analysis of the Austin–Strawson debate about the nature of truth.¹⁷ Basically Searle accepts Austin’s theory of truth, nevertheless, he makes minor changes to it. In the 1950s a debate about the obscurity of the correspondence theory of truth took place between John L. Austin and Peter F. Strawson. Strawson criticized the main points of the Austinian correspondence theory and concluded that “[t]he correspondence theory requires, not purification, but elimination.”¹⁸ Although Searle accepted Strawson’s criticism, he did not think that the correspondence theory needed to be eliminated. Instead, he tried to reinterpret the theory, and reveal and clarify the original meaning of the words ‘true’, ‘fact’ and ‘correspondence’, words which had been heavily criticized by Strawson.

In Searle’s argument, the disquotational theory of truth (often regarded as one of the rival theories of the correspondence theory of truth) plays a central role. For Searle believes that the classical formulation of the correspondence theory of truth is in fact identical with the disquotational theory’s definition of truth. According to the disquotational theory an *S* sentence is considered to be true, if and only if *p*. This definition requires that *S*’s input value be a certain statement enclosed in quotation marks, and *p*’s input value be the same exact statement, but this time without the quotation marks. For

¹⁶ John R. Searle, *Speech Acts. An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, Cambridge University Press, 1969, 16.

¹⁷ Cf. John R. Searle, “Truth and Correspondence”, in John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*, The Free Press, 1995, 199–226.

¹⁸ Peter F. Strawson, “Truth”, in Peter F. Strawson, *Logico-Linguistic Papers*, Methuen, 1971, 190.

example, according to the disquotational theory the statement 'Snow is white' is true if and only if snow is white. The disquotational theory's definition of truth claims the same as the correspondence theory's definition of truth: a statement is true, if the things asserted in the statement correspond to the facts. As a conclusion we can assert, that the criteria of truth are the same in both the case of the correspondence theory and that of the disquotational theory: the things stated in a certain statement have to correspond to the facts.

Searle further argues that the final definition of truth cannot be grasped by the correspondence theory of truth. In order to be able to define the truth, we first have to define 'true' with the help of other semantically charged terms. In order to do this, we need the definitions of such terms as 'fact' and 'correspondence'.¹⁹

Considering Strawson's criticism presented against Austin's correspondence theory of truth, Searle admits, that the Austinian definition of truth treats true statements and the facts that these true statements correspond to, as if they were two radically different entities. The problem occurs, when the correspondence theory links these two different entities without further explaining the nature of their linking. The theory thus supposes that a linguistic entity can be linked with a non-linguistic entity. This supposition, however, is absurd in absence of a further explanation, because the two aforementioned entities are different in their essence.

Strawson's apparently overwhelming criticism urged Searle to formulate some arguments of his own, in order to defend the correspondence theory of truth. The elaboration of his standpoint led him to the etymological analysis of the terms 'true' and 'fact'. The etymology of the word 'true' revealed that the word is in strong connection with trustworthiness. A statement is considered to be true, if we do not doubt in its trustworthiness. A sentence which presents things in a certain way is said to be trustworthy, if the things presented are thus and thus, that is if the sentence presents things as they are. This view is in fact the corroboration of the disquotational theory of truth. Searle reaches the conclusion, that we needed the term 'true' to be able to determine the trustworthiness of a certain statement. The term 'true' serves exactly this purpose: with its help we can decide whether a statement is trustworthy or not. In the light of all these it is relevant to say, that the disquotational criterion of truth is in fact the criterion of the trustworthiness of a sentence.

In the case of 'fact' – the word being a noun – we tend to think that the word denominates an object. This is not the case, however. In case of the word 'fact' we also needed a word, to name the things according to which we declare a sentence to be true.

¹⁹ Cf. John R. Searle, "Truth and Correspondence", in John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*, The Free Press, 1995, 203.

The disquotational criterion already defines these things, according to which we say, that a certain statement is true. We then needed a word which would do this in a general way. This word became 'fact'. Facts, then, denote those conditions, that if being fulfilled, make a statement true. Searle puts it this way: "[a]nything sufficient to make a statement true is a fact."²⁰

It seems that Searle has a plausible explanation for the correspondence theory of truth. He argues convincingly enough, that the correspondence theory of truth can cope with the requirements of the scientific context, thus denying Strawson's argument, according to which the correspondence theory should be eliminated. Searle's long time goal however, is not to enumerate a list of arguments for the acceptance of the correspondence theory, but to formulate scientific observations about the world. In this sense he wants to contribute to the Enlightenment vision, according to which the systematic cognition of the world is possible.²¹

Searle thinks, that while discussing about basic questions – like questions asked by the sciences – we already find ourselves in so-called default positions. These default positions are in fact presuppositions that are unquestioned, and these constitute the background of our thinking and our language. Such default positions are for example, that "[t]here is a real world that exists independently of us, independently of our experiences, our thoughts, our language",²² or that "[o]ur statements are typically true or false depending on whether they correspond to how things are, that is, to the facts in the world."²³ The first position is often called the position of a mind independent external realism, while the second position is referred to as the correspondence theory of truth. Searle identifies these two positions or presuppositions as the principles of the Western Rationalistic Tradition.²⁴

To question these principles is to question the basis of the Western Rationalistic Tradition, on which science is based, and which constitutes the condition of possibility for every branch of science. The reason why Searle argues for the acceptance of the correspondence theory of truth is that of avoiding a paradoxical situation. For in case we would not accept the correspondence theory of truth, we would basically find ourselves in the paradoxical situation of trying to have a rational dispute, while querying one of the constitutive elements of rationality. And this would be absurd.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 212.

²¹ Cf. John R. Searle, *Mind, Language and Society. Philosophy in the Real World*, Basic Books, 1999, 1–6.

²² *Ibid.* 10.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Cf. John R. Searle, "Rationality and Realism, What is at Stake?", in *Daedalus*, Fall 1993, 122, 4, MIT Press, 60.

Both Austin and Searle argue for the acceptance of the correspondence theory of truth. In Austin's case the result of rethinking the problem of truth led to the distinction between the descriptive and the performative utterances. The aim of the descriptive utterances is to describe the facts. If these utterances succeed in describing the facts, we speak about true sentences. However, not every utterance's aim is to describe the facts. A group of these utterances is called performative utterances, and by uttering these, we in fact perform actions. The explicit recognition of these performative utterances is linked to Austin, and his recognition of this type of utterances roots in his thinking about the truth. Thus, in Austin's case the investigations about the correspondence theory of truth indirectly led to the sketching and later developing of the speech-act theory.

In Searle's case the correspondence theory of truth presents itself as an elemental part of the Western Rationalistic Tradition, and thus no sceptical approach can be taken seriously in reference to the correspondence theory of truth. The rejection of the correspondence theory would count as doubting the grounds of the Western Rationalistic Tradition, based on which the problem of truth can emerge, and the question concerning the truth can be framed at all. And, although Searle presents us certain arguments in favour of the acceptance of the correspondence theory of truth, he does not do this because he thinks that the rejection of the correspondence theory is possible, but rather because he wants to fulfil the requirement of the Western Rationalistic Tradition: that of giving an explanation to every problem. According to Searle, the enumeration of the possible arguments that can be presented for the acceptance of the correspondence theory of truth is as paradoxical as the questioning of the correspondence theory. The correspondence theory of truth cannot become a question under debate: it is always presupposed, that is, given.

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