

## TRUTH AND BELIEF

By H. Odera Orika\*

**STUDENT:** I believe that  $2+2$  is not equal to 4. And I am perfectly confident that no professor is able to impart any knowledge or truth to anybody.

**PROFESSOR:** You are completely mistaken and absurd.

**STUDENT:** But that is just your opinion which I am sure can never be true or communicate any knowledge to anybody.

**OBSERVER:** What is truth? What are the standards for determining what is true and what is false?

**STUDENT:** Whatever they are, no professor can enumerate them to you

In his important and logically admirable article 'Truth as Opinion',<sup>1</sup> Prof. Wiredu rejects what he calls an "objectivist theory of truth" and advances the thesis that truth is nothing but an opinion and that there are as many truths as there are opinions. By "opinion" he means a thought advanced from some specific point of view. And he regards opinion and beliefs as synonyms.

The objectivists theory of truth follows from the well known Platonic realist theory of knowledge of truth which is well expressed in *Theaetetus*. The theory makes a categorial distinction between knowledge (or truth) and opinion. Opinion or belief is said to have the characteristic of being fallible while knowledge or truth is infallible. And thus truth and opinion are mutually exclusive — the former is infallible, timeless or eternal while the latter is fallible, temporary and changeable.

Wiredu argues that this realist theory of truth is obviously false or mistaken. If truth is categorially different from opinion, he maintains, then truth is, as a matter of logical principle, unknowable. For any given claim to truth is merely an opinion advanced from some specific point of view, and categorially distinct from truth. Hence "knowledge of truth as distinct from opinion is a contradictory notion".

This consequence of the objectivist theory, he argues, contradicts an incontestable fact of common experience, namely, that "we sometimes know some propositions to be true and at other times make mistakes about truth."<sup>2</sup> Hence, he concludes, the objectivist theory is incorrect.

According to Wiredu, the only way to avoid the objectivist absurdity that

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1. UNIVERSITAS, Vol. 1 No. 3, March 1972.

2. *Ibid.* p. 13.

we cannot know truth is to introduce the cognitive element of point of view into the concept of truth and regard this element as being intrinsic to the concept. Hence truth, he argues, is necessarily joined to opinion or belief and any claim that truth is independent of the fact that it is perceived or advanced by some person from some specific point of view is thereby refuted. Truth is identical with opinion.

## I

The argument can be shortened and sketched as follows:

1. If truth is categorically different from opinion, then we cannot know truth.
2. But we can know truth.
3. Truth is not categorically different from opinion (follows by *Modus tollens* from 1 & 2).

Although the above argument is valid, one cannot correctly infer from its conclusions that truth is identical with opinion. That truth is not categorically different from opinion may mean that there is a connection or relation between truth and opinion, but it does not imply that truth and opinion are identical as Wiredu has inferred.

However premise 2 of the argument needs to be scrutinized because I think that it is unwarranted. The premise is supposed to be a corollary of what Wiredu appears to regard as the paradigm of his thesis namely that it is "incontestable fact of common experience that we sometimes know some propositions to be true . . ." But this fact of common experience (henceforth simply the "*fce*") I believe has been over-interpreted by Wiredu to mean (imply) more than it actually does. What the *fce* proves is not 'that we sometimes know' but only that we sometimes are certain, assert or opine that we know. But the assertion 'I am certain that ...' is not logically equivalent to the assertion 'I know that...' neither is it correct to maintain that when I am certain that *p* then it means or implies that I know that *p*. Certainty is at most only the highest degree of belief. When one is certain that *p* one is absolutely sure, perfectly confident or has no doubt whatsoever that *p*. And this means that one has, as far as one is concerned, an incontestable belief that *p* — one believes that *p*.

The *fce* merely proves or implies that we sometimes assert with perfect conviction or feel certain that some propositions are true and others false. But for convenience we may, as we often do, shorten the long and seemingly awkward assertion 'I feel certain that' or 'I am perfectly confident that' to read simply as 'I know that'. Certainty does not imply knowledge although the two are not mutually exclusive — it is possible that one may be both certain that *p* and know that *p*. It is an incontestable principle in the concept of knowledge that 'If you know you can't be wrong'. Yet it is possible to be certain, perfectly confident, that *p* and then come to realize that this belief is (was) a mistake.

That *fce* at most proves only that we sometimes are 'certain that' rather than "know that" is illustrated (unconsciously I believe) even by Wiredu in the same article. He writes:

"I too am reasonably confident in the belief that  $2+2=4$  and that anybody who holds the contrary is mistaken. But I cannot help recognising that this is simply to affirm my belief and express my disagreement with any contrary belief.<sup>3</sup>

3. *Ibid.* p. 17.

If this interpretation, namely, that the *fce* at most proves only that we are sometimes certain that we know rather than that we know, then premise 2 in the above argument does not follow from the *fce*. And without this premise the argument is completely wrecked.

## II

It appears that in his eagerness to equate truth with opinion, Wiredu has confused what should be regarded as an incontestable fact in the concept of knowledge, namely, that it is only through belief or perception that truth is revealed, asserted or known to be the case with the highly disputable proposition that nothing is true outside our beliefs — i.e. the truth of a proposition does not depend on any condition outside the mind.

It is plausible to maintain that for any true proposition to be known as true, it must be perceived, asserted, or believed or advanced from some specific point of view. After all it is certain that all those propositions which we know to be true, we believe to be true — knowledge entails true belief — knowing that *p* implies believing that *p*. But this principle is not the same as the one which might claim that to be true is to be perceived, believed or opined to be true — i.e. nothing is true independently of our beliefs or perception. This claim entails that whatever *is* is known or perceived — “to be is to be known”. This claim is basic to Wiredu’s thesis and I note that he has argued for it in his paper on *To be is to be known*<sup>4</sup>. I will not discuss the argument of that paper here. But I want to point out that the thesis that the only way of knowing or revealing truth is through belief or perception does not warrant the claim that truth is nothing but an opinion (belief) or that to be true is to be known. Truth is not a percept although it can be expressed through or as a percept.

In his paper “Truth and Existence”<sup>5</sup> Mr. Archampong argues rightly that although the distinction between truth and opinion breaks down on the realist conception of truth, this “does not mean abandoning completely the view that the truth of a statement depends on the condition of the world and the condition of the world depends on what exists”<sup>6</sup> and what exists is something much more than just mind and its percepts.

Wiredu’s mistake lies in using the plausible principle that knowledge entails belief (*knowing that entails believing that*) to infer and assert the very implausible idea that for anything or proposition to be true is to be opined.

Wiredu can rectify this mistake only by arguing that only propositions are capable of being true or false. And by propositions he must mean only linguistic propositions — propositions which are assertions and not merely unasserted beliefs (or opinions) or thoughts. However, I do not agree that truth value should be restricted only to linguistic propositions.

## III

We are used to contrasting truth and falsehood. And it is never disputed that truth and falsehood are opposites. Wiredu’s thesis implies that truth and belief

4. *The Legon Journal of the Humanities*, Vol. 1, 1974. Since “Truth as Opinion” is a logical consequence of “To be is to be known” a disproof of the former entails a disproof of the latter, Wiredu has indicated that “Truth as Opinion” is a special case of “To be is to be known”.

5. *UNIVERSITAS*, Vol. 1 No. 4, June 1972.

6. *Ibid.* p. 86

are identical or that the following formula is sound:  $p$  is true  $\equiv p$  is believed i.e. " $p$  is true" is equivalent to " $p$  is believed".

Now if truth is identical with belief, then there can be no such thing as "false belief" — it must be absurd that a belief is false since it is absurd that truth is false. This conclusion is not avoided by the argument that truth and falsity apply to comparative assertions and not to single assertions or primary judgements, as Wiredu has tried to argue. According to his argument we can properly or intelligibly ask whether a proposition is true or false only in comparison to another assertion which is supposed to be a counter-assertion to the first proposition. Thus truth value is relevant only in this sort of comparative inquiry i.e. in making "a judgement on a judgement". But a primary judgement or an assertion which is not a counter-assertion to any other cannot sensibly be classified as true or false. And this entails that since beliefs are not counter-assertions, they can never sensibly be termed "false".

The above argument if correct entails that not all propositions or statements are capable of being true or false i.e. that some propositions being "primary judgements" or mere beliefs (*mental propositions*) are not capable of being true or false. It is, however, an incontestable principle of logic and philosophy that every proposition is capable of being true or false.

I am, however, aware that this incontestable principle about truth value of propositions has been challenged by some linguistically minded philosophers.<sup>7</sup> They have argued that truth and falsity are "logically superfluous" to a proposition; that they are not predicates which stand for properties of propositions. When we utter that 'Mr. X committed the murder' and also that 'It is true Mr. X committed the murder' there is no difference between the two propositions. The latter simply says what the former says but the phrase "It is true" is merely for stylistic or rhetoric purposes and can be dispensed with without any loss of meaning whatsoever.

This aberration in the concept of a proposition, however, does not prove or show that a proposition is incapable of being true or false or that it is awkward (senseless) to describe a proposition as being capable of acquiring a truth value. All that it proves (if at all it proves anything) is that truth and falsity are not essential properties of a proposition. But it does not prove that it is senseless, incorrect or unintelligible to describe a proposition as capable of being true or false.

My white shirt does not have the colour or property of yellowness — yellowness is not an essential property of my shirt. But my white shirt is capable of acquiring the property of yellowness. And hence the proposition 'My white shirt is capable of being yellow' is a correct and intelligible assertion. But the assertion 'My white shirt is capable of being happy' is an incorrect and senseless assertion. A shirt cannot acquire the property of happiness — it is not capable of being happy.

Now the argument that truth and falsity are not (essential) properties of a proposition does not contradict the principle that a proposition is capable of being true or false<sup>8</sup>. It does not prove that it is senseless, unintelligible or improper to assert that  $p$  is true or that  $p$  is false (where  $p$  is a proposition) as it is to assert that 'My white shirt is capable of being happy'. And if a proposition is capable of being true or false then a false proposition is logically possible. In

7. See for example F. P. Ramsey on "Facts and Propositions" in TRUTH, Edited by George Pitcher, Prentice Hall (1964).

8. But I do not even in the first place agree with Ramsey that truth and falsity are not essential properties of a proposition.

fact every proposition is capable of being false (even though it may be true). And in as much as assertions or primary judgements are propositions they are capable of being true or false. And if a false primary judgement is possible then a "false belief" is possible. But the possibility of a false primary judgement or a false belief is inconsistent with Wiredu's thesis. Therefore the thesis must be incorrect.

#### IV

If Wiredu's thesis is valid or correct then it is impossible for any one to maintain simultaneously two mutually contradictory propositions. He answers this objection by arguing that "a contradiction arises only when two mutually inconsistent propositions are asserted from *one and the same point of view*" but he implies that it is impossible for any normal person to maintain or believe a contradictory proposition.

In his *Belief, Truth and Knowledge*<sup>9</sup> D. M. Armstrong discusses the questions of contradictory and conjunctive beliefs. He argues that it is possible for one to believe that *p* and also that *q* where *q* is equivalent to *not p*. The person holding this belief may not be aware that *q* is equivalent to *not p*. Nevertheless this does not remove the fact that the person believes that *p* and *q* i.e. that *p* and *not p*. And this is a contradictory belief or proposition. However, it is not necessary that for one to maintain a contradictory belief one must be unaware of the contradictory nature of the belief. He illustrates this by referring to Hume's assertion in the *Treatise* "there are two principles which I cannot render consistent, nor is it in my power to renounce either of them"

Now, if we can prove that one can hold a single conjunctive belief or proposition whose components are inconsistent then we shall have proved that one can maintain a contradictory belief or proposition simultaneously or from one and the same point of view. Armstrong suggests that believing that *p* and that *q* does not entail believing the conjunction of *p* and *q* although the reverse entailment holds — believing that *p* and *q* entails believing that *p* and believing that *q*. But Armstrong suggests that where a set of believed propositions together function for some mind as a reason for believing something further, or acting in some way, then these propositions form the content of a single conjunctive belief. If A believing that *r* is a result (or effect) of A believing that *p* and *q* none of which can alone function to bring about A believing that *r*, then A believing that *p* and *q* can be regarded as a single conjunctive belief.<sup>10</sup>

What remains for us now is to show a practical illustration of Armstrong's argument. Take what can legitimately be regarded as a theistic-Christian belief, namely, that we are all freely choosing sons of the Lord (God), the creator of all things. This belief or proposition I consider as a consequence of the single conjunctive belief that God is the creator of all things but He does not create evil. Now in so far as the "creator of evil" is a part of the meaning of the predicate "creator of all things", a non-creator of evil cannot be the creator of all things. Hence the belief is equivalent to 'God is the creator of all things but it is not the case that God is the creator of all things'. This belief is perfectly contradictory, though it is known that many Christians maintain it. (Usually in the form that 'God is the creator of everything but God does not create

9. Cambridge University Press, (1973).

10. See Armstrong, *op. cit.* pp. 106-108.

evil' — evil they believe is the creation of the free will and action of men). Now from what point of view do the Christians maintain this belief? From one and the same point of view as that on which it is held that the Almighty gave his human creatures a "free will".

To save his thesis from this objection Wiredu might respond that those who maintain this belief are logically unsophisticated or that they are unaware of the inconsistency of their belief. But this would not do. Sufficient to prove that a contradictory proposition (belief) arises, is to prove that some people or person maintain(s) a single inconsistent conjunctive belief. But it does not matter whether those who hold such a belief do so because they are unaware of the inconsistency or because they fear to consider or rethink their belief or even because they are half-wits. An unconsidered belief or opinion is still a belief and must on Wiredu's opinion be considered as true as any other, otherwise there would not be "as many truths as there are opinions".

## V

Now it is important to assess what would be the effect of Wiredu's thesis in practice. The author himself has done this and I hope I am not being unfair to him if I also make some remarks as to the moral and social implications of the thesis.

Wiredu remarks that the concept of absolute truth appears to him to have a tendency to encourage dogmatism and fanaticism which in turn lead to authoritarianism especially in religion and politics. And he thinks or hopes that men would refrain from imprisoning and killing others if they could understand clearly that by doing so they simply act on their own fallible opinions as against those of others.

I think Wiredu is quite right to say this since much of human persecution, fanaticism and terrorism in politics and religion has been practised under the pretext of defending or promoting "absolute truth". I believe that some moderation in matters of truth and belief must be a logical consequence of an enlightened mind and rational thinking.

However, I am afraid that the position that truth is nothing but an opinion is as extreme as the position that there is an absolute truth and is liable to lead to intolerable moral, social or political consequences. The position does not say only that man is the measure of all things (Protagoras), it says also that there can be nothing true outside the whims and beliefs of the individual, no matter how wicked and stupid he may be. In politics anarchism would be a logical consequence of this position.

Again if Wiredu's thesis is consistently maintained and applied, then any principle of learning or education must be regarded as being purely arbitrary. Why should we have some rules of learning or professors when truth is but an opinion and there are as many truths as there are opinions. A student can maintain that '2 + 2 is never equal to 4' or that 'no professor is ever capable of imparting any knowledge or truth to anybody'. But we shall not be justified to refute this student any more than he is justified to maintain these beliefs.

I think that one of the necessary ways of promoting human toleration and reducing fanaticism and unnecessary authoritarianism is by inventing methods which promote knowledge and education in the world. But this knowledge must be some kind of objective (non-personal or non-subjective) knowledge if it is to be put to a good use and employed in promoting the welfare and happiness of at least a majority of mankind.

## Truth and Belief

I wish now to state rather briefly the theory of truth that I am most in sympathy with. This theory covers all those theories which might be classified as the coherence, universalist and self-evidence theories of truth.<sup>11</sup>

Both the position that truth is categorially or radically different from belief and that truth is identical with belief are incorrect. The correct position seems to lie between these two extremes. I think, as Wiredu might rightly argue, that if truth is categorially different from belief then truth is inexpressible. On the other hand, if truth is identical with belief, then no belief or proposition can ever be *capable* of being false.

I believe that for any proposition to be true there has to be at least an assumed or a given criterion which the proposition must fulfil; and if it fails to fulfil it, the proposition must be rejected as false. This is a criterion with which a true proposition agrees, and every assertion or belief which agrees with it is true. In fact, for every proposition such a criterion exists although it may be implicit. This criterion can be regarded as final and irrevocable as the rationalist theory of truth seems to require. According to the rationalist theory of truth, there has to be a self-evident or necessarily true premise on the basis of which other premises or truths are inferred. On the other hand, the criterion can be regarded merely as a provision — an observational sentence — whose truth we cannot be certain about, as the empiricist theory of truth stipulates. Finally a criterion may simply be considered as an axiom or a primitive term on which all other terms and assertions are defined and assessed.

A criterion of truth can be a moral norm, a scientific law, a necessary truth, a prophet's postulate, some consensus opinion or will of the a military dictator, etc. etc. This conglomeration of criteria shows that we should never confuse what is true with what is desirable or moral. Truth is independent of good and evil although it is not incapable of being good or evil.

If in some system or school of thought the criterion of truth is, say "Dialectical and Historical Materialism", then any assertion contrary to this law or principle must be considered false; and it must be this principle and not any specific point of view which helps to decide what is true and what is not true.

It is possible that the final or basic criterion of truth is so remote and obscure that no one can in practice clearly determine if an assertion or a belief actually agrees with it. But in this case there will be a chain of coherent but less basic or ultimate criteria leading ultimately to the basic criterion. Now, to determine if an assertion or a belief is true, it will be enough to assess whether it is consistent (coherent) with any selected set of these less basic criteria.

To the extent that a criterion of truth may be a necessary truth or a scientific law and since the truth of a necessary proposition or validity of a scientific law does not depend on the will or belief of anybody,<sup>12</sup> it follows that whatever is regarded as true according to such criteria is something more than just an opinion advanced from some specific view point. However, it is plausible (in

11. See for example K. Ajdukiewicz: *Problems & Theories of Philosophy* translated by H. Skolimowski & A. Quinton Cambridge University Press, 1973, chapter 2.

12. Newton's law of gravitation is something more than just Isaac Newton's opinion that bodies fall or are attracted to the centre of the Earth.

fact, correct) to argue that if the basic criterion of truth is the will of a military dictator then whatever is regarded to be true accordingly is nothing but a jingling of somebody's opinion. And in this sense it would be intelligible to maintain that truth (in this context) is nothing but an opinion.

It must follow that in the world we never have just one truth but many truths. And depending on their criteria, some truths may be more universal, permanent or objective than the others. When two truths or propositions are in conflict on the ground that they are based on different criteria, the more universal or permanent is the one whose criterion is more scientific<sup>13</sup> or self-evident than the other. In practice this will be very difficult to determine. However, if none of the criteria is more scientific or self-evident than the other, then the more universal or permanent of the propositions is the one which will *ultimately* win. Again, this is difficult to determine especially since "ultimately" here may refer to a very distant future. However, we can record the problem and leave it to our future generations to observe or assess the result. If, for example, Capitalism and Socialism conflict, the more true is the one which is more scientific (or self-evident) than the other or else the one which will eventually or ultimately win. By "ultimately" we mean something more than just temporary or periodic successes. To win ultimately a truth has to prevail when its rival is permanently eradicated. But a rival is not permanently eradicated unless all its effects are also permanently removed.

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13. Using the term "scientific" in a very broad sense to mean something which is logical, non-arbitrary, or in keeping with the universal laws of nature.