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**What's going on?**

In 2001 Britain and America went to war. This was a 'war against terrorism' with several enemies. The explicit though elusive target of the first campaign of this war was the terrorist network al-Qaeda and its bases in Afghanistan. The Taliban regime in Afghanistan, an alleged state sponsor of terrorism, also became a target owing to its refusal to 'hand over' Osama bin Laden, the leader of al-Qaeda, who had his headquarters in the country. Relatively few British or American lives were directly at risk in this campaign.

In the UK, the media coverage of this conflict was, in historical terms at least, surprisingly mixed. Little more than twenty years ago, when Britain had gone to war with Argentina over the Falkland Islands—Las Malvinas—the media mood was generally jingoistic. There was of course some dissent, but overall it was clear who the good and the bad guys were supposed to be.

Go back even further to the Second World War and the differences are even more marked. The government propaganda films of the day strike modern viewers as almost comical in their simplicity. They present a simple world-view where the brave and noble allies are the enemies of the evil Hun. What is more, the average civilian, reading the newspapers or watching the news-reels, generally seemed to accept without question the official information put out by government departments.

In the war against terrorism, by contrast, there was much more questioning. For example, early in 2002, the *Mirror*, a populist British tabloid, devoted its front page to questioning the effectiveness of the military campaign. Such a move in a popular paper when, from a British point of view, the campaign seemed

to be going pretty well and there had been no British casualties to date, would once have been unthinkable. In the more serious broadsheet press, the lack of a clear consensus in the comment pages was more predictable. But even here the range of divergent opinions and the depth of the questioning was unusual.

Of course, some of these differences can be accounted for in terms of the very different natures of the various conflicts. But it also seems to be the case that the different reactions are in part due to an important change in public attitudes. We are now more sceptical, both of our governments and our media. We no longer trust either to present us with the truth. We chew over what they tell us rather than swallow it whole. In short, the public is much less naive than it used to be. We want to know what's going on but don't seem to be able to trust any of the sources that might tell us.

This deep questioning which has gone on in the media is not just a consequence of a loss of innocence. There are also several important philosophical issues mixed up in the various discussions of the rights and wrongs of the campaign. Some of these concern the morality of war, and I will look at these in Chapter 4. Others, however, concern issues of truth and knowledge. These are the subject of the present chapter.

The acuteness of Arthur Ponsonby's observation that truth is the first casualty of war is not diminished by its becoming a cliché. In times of conflict governments and other agents are very keen to control the information flow in order to keep the civilian population on side or the international community at bay. Consider, for instance, how wildly different were Israeli and

Palestinian accounts of the alleged massacre at the Jenin refugee camp in April 2002. This means that knowing what the truth is in times of war can be extremely difficult. If we want to know the extent of civilian casualties, how prisoners of war are being treated or what the real threat of further terrorist attacks are—all vital for making a judgement as to the rights or wrongs of the war—we need accurate information. But what are our chances of knowing the truth about any of these when the best source of information—government intelligence—comes to us through the filter of political propaganda? Without some kind of guide for distinguishing truth from falsehood, we are lost.

There is a second difficulty, which is more fundamental. The problem here is that there seem to be what we might call competing truth claims. For instance, on the one hand, there are those who believe that America was attacked without provocation by a band of terrorists with no respect for liberty and human life. On the other, there are those, particularly in places like Palestine, who believe that American imperialism has repeatedly attacked Islam in the Middle East and that al-Qaeda is part of a holy struggle to save the region from American domination. The worry here is not that we can't tell which account is true. It is rather that there is no one truth—instead one set of facts is true for some people and another true for others. It just depends on how you look at it.

There are many such competing truth claims. Was the tape of Bin Laden 'confessing' to the 11 September attacks real or genuine? Were the Taliban prisoners killed at the fort near Mazar-i-Sharif the victims of an atrocity or did they just lose out in a battle to escape? Were the Taliban prisoners held in American

detention camps in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba mistreated and denied basic human rights or just temporarily shackled for security reasons? In all of these cases, the worry is not that we do not know the truth, but that there is no single truth there at all. What the truth is depends on through whose eyes you are looking at things.

The branch of philosophy which considers questions about truth and knowledge is known as epistemology or, more prosaically, the theory of knowledge. Two of the central issues of epistemology have a direct bearing on these responses to the news about a conflict such as the war against terrorism. In broad terms, these are questions, first, about the status or nature of truth itself and, second, about our relationship to that truth.

The first issue is the more fundamental. What is at stake here is whether or not there exists a single, objective truth or whether it is more accurate to say that there is a plurality of 'truths' or even no truth at all, only opinion. The first view can be termed realist because it asserts that the truth exists whether we know it or not: the truth is real and independent of us. For the second view we have to be content with the name non-realist, for only this term covers the wide range of different positions all opposed to realism. On this view, the idea that the truth exists independently of us, just waiting to be discovered, is intellectually unsophisticated. Truth is never just 'out there'. Truths are always in some way created, by language, society, individuals, or cultures.

These somewhat academic-sounding concerns may sound a long way from media coverage of the war against terrorism. But I

would argue that the tendency for forms of non-realism to become the orthodoxy in many 'educated' circles has contributed to the uncertainty over responses to the anti-terrorism campaign. If there is no one truth, then the best we can do in this conflict is to list the various competing 'truths' which are believed by the opposing sides. So, for example, members of the al-Qaeda network see themselves as following God's will; many Americans believe it is they who have God on their side. Some see the civilian casualties in Afghanistan as being a form of intentional murder; others see them as unintentional 'collateral damage'. Some see American incursions into Afghanistan as breaches of international law; others see it as in line with the laws of self-defence. The list could go on.

Of course, very few people are explicitly non-realists about truth. But many features of non-realism have infused the way many of us think today. At the very least, it introduces a series of doubts into people's minds as they consider the distant conflict: Who are we to say who is right and who is wrong? Who are we to say what 'the truth' about this conflict is?

This profound unease about the very possibility of a single truth is accompanied by a less fundamental, but no less important unease about our relationship to the truth. Let us suppose for a moment that non-realism does not affect our thinking. We believe there is one truth and that truth is 'out there'. Nevertheless, there is still another problem: how can we know what that truth is? We are confronted with so many different, competing claims for truth. How can we sort through these and discover the real truth buried underneath? If we are sceptical about the possibility of finding out what the real truth is, then we can be left as

uncertain about a conflict such as the war against terrorism as we would be if we rejected the very idea of truth itself.

These concerns about truth and knowledge affect the way we read about any news story. If we do not believe it is possible for news stories to be true and objective, why should we bother with them at all? The problem, however, is not only one for the non-realists and sceptics. Even if we are not sceptical about the very possibility of truth and knowledge about world events, we still need some way of distinguishing between truth and falsity, knowledge and opinion. And we also need some way of answering those who would view our belief in truth and knowledge as being outmoded, naive, and simplistic.

I believe these questions are important for several reasons. For one, it seems to be an undeniable fact about human beings that they care about the truth. The desire for the truth to be acknowledged can become the issue of most importance in people's lives. In South Africa after apartheid, it was felt truth was more important than even justice, and so partial immunity was granted to those prepared to testify to the truth. People wrongly convicted of crimes will seek to clear their names even after they are released. And on a more mundane level, having untruths told about oneself is one of the most infuriating and hurtful things that can happen. So despite the sceptical doubts we may have about the possibility of finding truth, the fact that we care about it is one reason why we should try to understand what it is as clearly as possible.

Secondly, we live in the 'information age' and we are bombarded all the time with various conflicting and competing claims for truth and knowledge. Some people deny the holo-

caust, others assert it happened as a matter of undeniable fact. Some say they know that Jesus is Lord, others say that atheism is the true view. Some people say that scientists know we are nothing more than biological organisms while others say our true selves are spiritual and still others say scientists know nothing at all—it's all just their point of view. From time to time we may throw our hands up and say, 'maybe they're all right' but more often than not, we make a choice between competing truth claims. Some of these choices are very important, others less so. But we make them all the time, and having some understanding of the meaning of truth and knowledge can only help us choose more wisely.

### **Truth first**

As knowledge seems to depend on truth and not the other way around, it makes sense to start with truth. The view that there is no one truth is a remarkably popular one. Indeed, teaching introductory philosophy classes, I have had students say to me that they assumed this was what all philosophers now think. As it turns out, philosophers believe many different things about truth, some of which are certainly non-realist. Since the Ancient Greek philosopher Protagoras proclaimed that 'Man is the measure of all things' there have always been philosophers who it would be accurate to describe as relativists. But very few of these relativisms boil down to the belief that no 'truths' are superior or inferior to any other, or that truth is simply what people happen to believe. It is this crude version of relativism about truth which I am concerned with here, not its more

sophisticated philosophical cousins. On this view there is no one truth, rather truth is always relative to a society, individual, or culture. Put another way, things are never true, period, and that makes it pointless even to talk about unqualified truth. Things are always true *for* someone, some society, or some culture. It may be true *for you* that Bin Laden is a terrorist, but it is true *for others* that he is a holy warrior. It may be true *for you* that America is a benign world-policeman, but it is true *for others* that it is a neo-imperialistic power.

On a radio programme not long ago, I heard a professor of English defend the claim that truth is relative using the example of Columbus. He asked whether it is true that Columbus discovered America. He claimed that while this is true for the conquistadors, it clearly wasn't true for the native Americans. Hence, he argued, what's true for some people is not true for others. In this way, he was endorsing the popular relativist view of truth I described above: there is no truth, period, only truth for someone, some culture, or some society.

A parallel argument can be constructed for the campaign in Afghanistan. Consider the incident at the fort near Mazar-i-Sharif. Here, according to the Northern Alliance troops who held the Taliban captives, more than 400 prisoners were killed because they started an uprising and could only be stopped with violence. According to the Taliban, the uprising was caused by the fact that the prisoners had been mistreated and the Northern Alliance was over-zealous in quashing it. So if we ask the question, were the prisoners fairly treated, we might say that is true for the captors but not for the captives. There is no one truth.

Both these arguments seem to me to be terrible pieces of

reasoning. The arguments move from the mere fact that people have different opinions to the conclusion that truth is relative. We are asked to accept that because the native American and the conquistadors, the Northern Alliance and the Taliban, *believed* different things to be true, there is no one truth. But instead of demonstrating that this is the case, these arguments merely assume it. It is obvious that the mere fact that people disagree about the truth doesn't prove there is more than one truth. All it shows is that people disagree. If we disagree about what the capital of Australia is, it doesn't therefore follow that Australia has two capitals. In this case, it is clear that one of us is in fact wrong.

All these examples show is that the same event can have two different descriptions and that these descriptions may seem to conflict. In the Americas case, it is quite clear that the conflict only occurs at the level of description—there is no disagreement about the underlying facts. Both the conquistadors and the native Americans knew full well that the native Americans were there first. The conquistadors weren't that stupid. The reason why there is a disagreement is that what was a discovery for the conquistadors was not a discovery for the native Americans. A discovery is when one learns for the first time that something is true. To say Columbus discovered America is to say therefore that Columbus was the first European to find out that America existed, a fact the native Americans knew already. So the difference between the natives and the conquistadors is not that there are two truths out there. It is rather that there is one truth out there—America exists—and one group knew that while the other previously had not.

So the idea that there was one truth for the conquistadors and one for the native Americans turns out to be a very superficial one. It only seems to be a respectable view if we take the different ways of describing the event at face value. When we look closer we find not only that there is one true set of facts, but that both groups would actually agree about what they were: There was a continent that had been inhabited for a very long time and Columbus was the first European to go there.

In the case of the Mazar-i-Sharif uprising, there are two disagreements. One is about how we judge what went on. Perhaps both parties could agree on the sequence of events, but still one side would judge that the captors behaved fairly, the other that they behaved barbarically. The same point arises here as it does when we consider facts. The mere fact that the two parties disagree about whether an action is fair or unfair is not enough to show that both parties are right. The existence of different views about morality no more shows that morality is relative than the existence of different views about what the facts are shows that truth is relative.

But even if we do want to end up saying that there is no objective way of telling who is right about what is morally fair, this still does not lead to the conclusion that truth is relative, since the questions of what is moral and what is factually correct are separate. It is perfectly possible to accept moral relativism while rejecting epistemic relativism—relativism about truth. So, for example, one might say that there is a single truth about what actually happened at Mazar-i-Sharif, but there is no single truth as to whether or not what happened was morally justifiable.

Moral 'truth' can be—and arguably should be—kept separate from factual truth.

The second disagreement concerning Mazar-i-Sharif, however, is about the facts, since the two parties do not actually agree about what the sequence of events was. But this does not mean that both alleged sets of facts about what happened are true. If we were able to see all that went on at Mazar-i-Sharif over the three days of the uprising we would be in a position to tell which account was correct. The fact that we don't know which account is right (or might be wrong when we judge which is false) does not mean that there is more than one truth.

Consider the conquistadors again. What if Columbus wasn't the first European to visit the Americas? If the Vikings had got there first, would that mean that the statement 'Columbus was the first European to visit America' is true for us, but not true for the Vikings? It would not. All it would mean is that we were wrong. In other words, it shows we may be wrong to think we know the truth, not that there may be more than one truth. Whether there is a single truth and whether we can claim to know the truth are two different questions. The first concerns what is, the second what we know. If we ignore this difference, we cannot make sense of the distinction between what we *think* is true and what *is* true.

If we do not make this distinction we soon end up with nonsense. If everything we think to be true is true, or there is no difference between the two, then that means we can never be in error. To believe this is to fly away with the fairies. For example, it is very possible to think today is Wednesday when really it is

Thursday. But if there is no difference between what I think is true and what is true, then if I think today is Wednesday it is Wednesday, and damn the calendar. If I arrive late for work, I can simply say, 'It may be true for you that I'm late, but it's true for me that I'm early.' Such a state of affairs would be absurd. Not only would it be impractical and unworkable, I doubt whether anyone could seriously believe it. When you arrive late for work and make your excuses that truth is relative, I am certain that not too deep down you would think that, actually, you really were late.

If the absurdity and impracticality of this view is not enough to convince you it is wrong, then ask yourself if you could believe the following: it is true for some people that six million people were killed in the holocaust but it is not true for others. It is no more true to say that the world is spherical than it is to say it is flat. The view that there is life after death and that death is the end are both equally true. I would say that to agree with these statements is to give up on all rational discourse. There would be no point in discussing anything with someone who believed these things, because, in effect, they have agreed to suspend all judgement on anything. Of course, if we say 'true for me' just means 'what I believe' then it is trivially true that 'what's true for me may not be true for you'. But we must accept that there is another use of true, without the qualification 'for me, you, him, or them', which is more serious than this one. This use of true may turn out to be complex and involve elements of relativism, but it is not the crude relativism currently so popular in society and in some sections of academia.

We should now be able to see that it is too simplistic to say

that it may be true *for you* that God is not on Bin Laden's side, but it is true *for others* that he is; or that it may be true *for you* that al-Qaeda's suicide killers are now in heaven, but it is true *for others* that they are most certainly not. In some cases there are questions of moral judgement which may admit of disagreement. But there are many more facts which are not just matters of opinion. We may ultimately disagree as to whether or not to class Osama bin Laden as a terrorist. But before we reach that point we should be able to accept that the facts which we use as the basis for these judgements are truths that hold for everyone, not just some people. These facts concern what actually Bin Laden and America have done, what is actually written in the Koran, how the major players in this campaign have formed their decisions and so on. There is nothing relative about any of these facts. They may be hard to ascertain, but that does not make them any less objective and real.

### The attractions of relativism

Before moving on, it may be worth thinking about why this view has become so popular in recent years. I think that the reasons that explain its popularity are a lot more important than the view itself. Consider the appeal of relativism when trying to understand why it is that people willingly join al-Qaeda and martyr themselves for its benefit. To have any chance of understanding this, it is important to suspend judgement on the people and societies we are thinking about and really to try to get within their world-view and understand it. While it may make sense, however, to suspend judgement for research purposes, that does

not mean that we should suspend judgement on cool reflection afterwards.

But there is another motivation at work here: respect for diversity of opinion. We live in a multi-cultural world where many groups have many different conceptions of reality and truth. Indeed, countries like Britain have large Muslim minorities, some, perhaps many, of whom have very different world-views from those of the typical white liberal. It is vital that these points of view are listened to with respect. To impose our view (whoever 'we' may be) on everyone else seems colonialist, arrogant, and unfair. So it seems far better to accept everyone's version of the truth than fascistically to impose our own. We have had too much experience in the last century of the horrors of totalitarianism to presume there is one right way that all must follow.

If I describe these motives as noble I do not do so in any patronizing sense. But what we have to acknowledge here is that what we are really saying is that it is politically and socially undesirable to impose one view of the truth on everyone—it does not mean that there *is* no one truth. We are also saying that it is arrogant to presume that one has a *unique insight* into the truth, which is again different from saying there is no one truth. What we need to be afraid of is not that there is one truth, but that we might wrongly believe we have grasped that truth completely and impose it on other people. Both would be mistakes. One of the greatest of all philosophers, Socrates, is supposed to have said that the only thing he knew was that he knew nothing. Those who are most convinced that they are absolutely right are often those who are most terribly wrong. We are right to be sus-

picious of any group or individual who claim to know the whole truth, but that does not mean there *is* no one truth.

The other mistake is to impose by force our view of the truth on others. This is usually wrong for the reason just given, namely, that we are often mistaken about what we suppose to be true. But even if we were right, there seems little reason to believe that much good can come from imposing the truth on people. People will not see the truth through coercion and arguably it is better that people are wrong but free (so long as their ignorance does not harm others) than that they are forced to accept the truth. Political fascism is a disastrous policy, even when the fascist leader knows the truth.

So at the root of our love affair with relativism are two well-grounded beliefs: that we should not be arrogant about our claims to knowledge and truth and that it is wrong to impose our view of the truth on others. Neither of these views logically leads to the conclusion that there is no truth, but nonetheless many do make this leap, spurred on by the desire to respect the different beliefs of others. I have tried to argue that, all the same, it is disastrous to make this leap, which leaves us unable to distinguish truth from fiction, belief from knowledge, and opinion from fact.

One final point about relativism about truth: one reason we are attracted to it is because we know that people are different, and what may be good for some people may not be good for others. So, for example, arranged marriages might suit some people but not others. Some might flourish within the comforts of a traditional religion, others with non-belief. Some want to live with extended families, others with nuclear families, some

on their own. We feel that if there is one truth, then we have to give up this diversity. That does not follow. Truths about facts or states of affairs are different from statements of values or lifestyle preferences. The statement 'what suits me may not suit you' is entirely different from the statement 'what's true for me may not be true for you'. The view that there is such a thing as the truth does not mean that there is just one way to live. The two issues are distinct. So we need not fear that accepting there is one truth about matters of fact leads to a kind of cultural imperialism where all diversity of lifestyle is eradicated.

### Back to the war

What does this all mean for the war on terrorism in general? My suspicion is that at least some of the reaction to the war is confused because of an ill-thought-out attitude to truth. But we are right to be suspicious of the various versions of the truth that are presented to us. We are right to think that the real truth can be hard to uncover. We are right to want to respect the perspectives of other people and to, as far as is possible, incorporate them into our understanding of the situation. We are right to believe that the truth can appear to be very different depending on where you are looking at it from. We might be right to think that we should not export our values into countries that have different moral codes. But none of this is at all incompatible with the view that some of what is reported is true and some of it is false, and that there is no need to say for whom it is true or false: it is true or false for everyone.

The problem is not that people explicitly—or even

consciously—hold non-realist views. Most people would agree that the USA did or did not bomb a warehouse in Kabul run by the Red Cross in October 2001; that Bin Laden had or had not already left Afghanistan by the time Operation Enduring Peace began in the same month; and that the Afghan Northern Alliance did or did not deliberately kill 400 prisoners of war at Mazar-i-Sharif. When applied to specific facts, the non-realist position is just too counter-intuitive to appeal to many people. My view is rather that a much vaguer commitment to non-realism, especially as concerns moral values, tends to colour our whole way of thinking, so that we find ourselves instinctively withholding judgement. When the truth is hard to ascertain it is much easier to adopt a sceptical stance towards the possibility of truth than it is actually to get to it.

What we need to realize is that, at least when it comes to the facts about events, there is truth and there is falsehood and we need to be able to distinguish between the two. For sophisticated philosophical reasons, you may wish to say that the truth is nonetheless relative in some way and you may wish to reject the simply realist stance. But this does not mean one has to accept that there is no important difference between truth or falsehood or that one needs to adopt the crude version of relativism I have criticized in this chapter. We should not confuse a justifiable desire to avoid imposing one point of view on others with a rejection of the idea of truth. Indeed, to form any sensible judgement at all about the War on Terrorism we need to accept that there are some facts to base these judgements on.

## Knowledge

So far we have focused on the idea of truth. It could be argued that I have overestimated the extent to which non-realist ways of understanding truth have permeated the general consciousness. Perhaps most people do think that there is such a thing as 'the truth'. Nonetheless, what many more people do doubt is that we have any chance of knowing what this truth is. Who is to say what happened at Mazar-i-Sharif? Who knows if the Bin Laden videos are authentic? People are sceptical, perhaps not about the existence of truth, but about our ability to know it.

The contemporary American philosopher Thomas Nagel has said that scepticism about knowledge actually requires a realist conception. One can only be truly sceptical about the possibility of knowledge if one believes that there is something real to be known. Only if you accept that there is truth, but then claim we have no way of actually obtaining it, do you arrive at scepticism.

The British philosopher A. J. Ayer distinguished between philosophical and ordinary scepticism. Ordinary scepticism concerns the reliability of particular sources of knowledge. In this sense of the word, if I am sceptical about a daily tabloid newspaper, for example, then I do not believe it is a reliable source of knowledge. Philosophical scepticism, in contrast, is not about particular sources of knowledge, but the general possibility of knowledge. A philosophical sceptic, for example, might believe that it is not possible to obtain any knowledge of the 'external world' and that we can only know about the direct objects of our perception—what we see, hear, taste, touch, and smell. Whether these sensations correspond to an independent reality is something we can never know.

The person who does not believe it is possible truly to know what is going on in the war against terrorism is generally a sceptic in the ordinary sense of the word. Such a person does not normally believe that they cannot know whether material objects in general exist or whether they can know anything at all. Nevertheless, this ordinary scepticism is often motivated by the same kinds of concerns which can lead to philosophical scepticism, and for this reason a consideration of the philosophical response to the sceptical challenge can help provide a response to this ordinary scepticism.

What then does motivate scepticism about knowledge? Consider one example from the war on terrorism that might inspire scepticism. In December 2001 the US government released a video recording which showed Osama bin Laden talking about the attacks on the World Trade Centre three months earlier, in terms which made it clear that he had been behind the attacks. For most, this was the 'smoking gun' which proved Bin Laden's culpability. But some rejected this, saying that the film could have been faked. The poor quality of the soundtrack was taken as suspicious, as was the fact that there seemed no explanation of how the USA had got the tape or why Bin Laden would have agreed to being filmed in the first place.

Let us then assume, having considered the arguments in the first part of this chapter, that there is a truth of the matter here—the video was or was not a fake. The problem many have is that there seems no way we can ever prove the matter one way or another. Without proof, there can be no knowledge of the truth and all we are left with is a difference of opinion.

But this line of reasoning moves too fast and rests upon one

of the greatest red herrings in the history of argument: the significance of provability. The man who exposed this red herring was David Hume, and what he said provides the source of what I am going on to say next.

What is required to prove something is true? In law, it is to show that something is true 'beyond reasonable doubt'. What constitutes reasonable doubt is, of course, subject to debate. But there is another sense of proof, which philosophers yearned after for thousands of years—a proof so secure that it was beyond *all*—not just reasonable—doubt.

One problem with this notion of proof is that doubt is a state of mind, and some people find it impossible to doubt things that we all think have *not* been proven (for example, that mobile phone masts cause cancers), while others seem able to doubt things which most believe *are* proven (for example, that humans and apes share a common ancestor). So there is no direct relationship between proof on the one hand, and what we can or cannot doubt on the other. Proof concerns the reasons to accept statements about the world; doubt is about the states of our minds.

Indeed, experience should tell us that certainty is often inversely proportionate to knowledge. The fanatic who believes without question is wrong more often than the sceptic who feels certain about nothing. If knowledge is about what one cannot doubt, then the people who have the greatest claim to knowledge are those members of al-Qaeda who have no doubt that their martyrdom will send them straight to heaven.

So rather than defining proof in terms of what cannot be doubted, most philosophers have thought it more fruitful to look

to logic to provide the paradigm case of proof. Something can be logically proved if it can be shown that to deny it leads one to a logical contradiction. A popular example is a simple sum:  $1 + 1 = 2$ . Given the definitions of '1', '2', '+' and '=',  $1 + 1$  must equal 2. To deny this is to contradict yourself. The very meaning of the words themselves ensures that the sum is correct. Perhaps a more graphic example is the statement 'All bachelors are unmarried'. This must be true, because to deny it means to contradict the very meaning of the words used.

This is a simple point but one which is often misunderstood, so have patience with me if I say a little more about it. I have heard people object that it may be true in our world that  $1 + 1 = 2$  but that may not be true elsewhere. Similarly, in some countries, maybe bachelors can be married. This objection is mistaken because it assumes that because it is possible that the terms used could be used differently elsewhere, then the statements cannot be proved to be true. Certainly, there could be a country where the word 'bachelor' did not mean 'unmarried man', but all that would mean is that we have a word which both sounds and is written the same way as it is elsewhere, but which means something different. It doesn't show that the way we use 'bachelor', to mean that 'all bachelors are unmarried', is a statement which cannot be known with certainty to be true.

A final worry, which was first expressed by René Descartes in his masterpiece the *Meditations*, is that we may be so mad, deluded, or deceived that even what we think cannot be denied without contradiction may, in fact, be wrong. This form of radical scepticism is hard, if not impossible, to refute. It is logically possible that I am mad, or that I am just dreaming, or that I am a

brain in a vat, and all my experiences are the result of an evil scientist manipulating my brain to make me think that I am interacting in the world. But for reasons that should become clear, the mere fact that this is possible is no reason for us to believe that it is actually the case. And there are reasons for believing that to succumb to this kind of radical doubt is to leave us unable to say anything which makes sense at all. Belief that we are not mad or in a constant state of delusion is the bare minimum requirement for attempting to say anything about the world at all.

The concept of proof I have been describing, whereby something is proven to be true if it cannot be denied without logical contradiction, is all very well, but how much can really be proved in this way? Mathematics, geometry, and things true by definition seem provable on this test, but little else. Take the view that the earth orbits the sun. We can deny this without contradicting ourselves. We may have to hypothesize pretty remarkable things to explain why it seems to be that way, but that is not the same as logically contradicting ourselves. The person who claims NASA and the authorities are engaged in a conspiracy to convince us all the world is spherical may be mad, but she is not contradicting herself. In other words, it is logically possible she is right. In the same way, no matter how convoluted a story we have to tell in order to maintain that the Bin Laden tapes were fakes, we need not ever contradict ourselves to tell it. This means it is always a logical possibility that the story is true. The same is true of most, if not all, statements about the way the world actually is. Unlike a statement like ' $1 + 1 = 2$ ', it is always possible to assert the opposite of such statements without thereby contradicting

yourself. Therefore it always remains possible that you could be wrong, and so proof, in this strict sense, is unobtainable.

But just as an inability to prove something is right is no reason to dismiss a theory, so an inability to prove it is wrong is no reason to accept it. Many beliefs cannot be proved wrong. Let's say that right now I claim that there is an invisible pink elephant dancing on your book. It has no weight, no colour, smell, or texture, but it is there. You can't prove I'm not right, in the strict sense of proof we have been discussing! But clearly this is no reason to suppose I am right. Firm proof, both negative and positive, is perhaps always impossible when it comes to statements about the world, so an inability to provide such a proof is neither here nor there.

So if we insist that conclusive proof is required before we accept anything as true, we will never be able to accept any substantive statements about the world as true. Nothing could prove beyond all possible dispute that the Bin Laden tapes are genuine or fakes. This is the reason why the law demands only proof beyond *reasonable* doubt, not all *possible* doubt. Buried beneath the law is the philosophical insight that matters of fact—truths about what actually goes on in our world—can never be proved beyond all possible dispute.

So how do we prove things beyond *reasonable* doubt? As in a court case, we do so by appeal to the evidence. It is on the balance of evidence that we decide whether one view is right or wrong. In assessing the evidence, we can use a method of reasoning known as abduction. Abduction is a term coined by the American pragmatist philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce meaning 'argument to the best explanation'. The idea here is that we

are often presented with more than one possible explanation for an event or a state of affairs with no conclusive way of knowing which one is correct. In such instances, all we can hope to do is decide which explanation is best.

In making this decision we can make use of a few principles that people of reason throughout history have seen as reliable. The first, explained with some eloquence by David Hume's discussion of miracles in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, is that when an account contradicts other, well-established facts, we must have very good reasons before we accept it as true. For example, when I watch the illusionist David Copperfield 'flying' through the air, this contradicts the well-established fact that people cannot fly unaided. I therefore assume that he is not flying unaided at all, and I would be right to do so. No major 'magician' claims to be performing anything other than illusions. I marvel at his skill, but I don't throw away beliefs about the world which all other experience has shown to be true.

Of course, sometimes we are presented with evidence that challenges established facts and it turns out it is the established facts that are wrong. Such was the case in the third century BC, when people such as Hipparchus claimed the earth was spherical. But if we look a little closer, we will find that the reason why people were wrong to dismiss Hipparchus is because his view actually fitted more of the established facts than the view that the world was flat. It turned out that though Hipparchus' view conflicted with one big and popular view, it fitted in with countless other, better-established facts far better than the one it contradicted. For example, it explained the apparent motion of the

sun, stars, *and* planets, and why there is a horizon and why no one has ever fallen off the edge of the world. This is why I said we must have very good reason before accepting a view that contradicts established facts, not that we should never accept such views. Such a policy would simply prevent any progress in human knowledge at all.

Another principle widely accepted is that of economy of explanation. If you have two explanations for an occurrence, the idea is that, all other things being equal, we should always prefer the simpler over the more complex. This principle is known as 'Occam's Razor', after its progenitor, William of Occam. To see why this is a reasonable principle, consider this example: you find a hole in a window the width of one bullet and a bullet in the wall, in line with the hole. One explanation is that a single bullet has been fired through the window. A second explanation is that two bullets were fired through the same hole and that the second bullet has been removed by someone. A third explanation is that one hundred bullets were fired through the same hole, all of which have been removed bar the one in the wall. Which explanation would you go for? It seems only reasonable, all other things being equal, to favour the first. To accept the second you have to accept certain things being true that you have no good reason to believe are true. There is only evidence of one bullet being fired, so why believe there were two? The third option is simply outrageous. Though it is possible it is true, there is no good reason to suppose it is.

Of course, often the real explanation is not the simplest, which is why the clause 'all other things being equal' is important. If it were reported that two shots were heard to fire in quick

succession and that there was evidence that someone had entered the room and removed something, that would make us consider the second view. But without this extra evidence, we would be foolish to pursue the two-bullet theory. After all, if we always considered every possible explanation, no matter how outrageous, and without any reason to suppose it is the true one, we would never get anywhere.

A third principle is to prefer the theory which has greater explanatory power. Here's an example from the philosopher Hilary Putnam. A long-standing philosophical puzzle is how we can know other people have minds, given that we cannot look into their heads and see if they are really thinking, feeling, and perceiving. Couldn't other people just be robots or zombies that behave as though they had minds? Putnam's solution to this problem is simply to measure up the two hypotheses. If we assume other people have minds, that explains why it is they talk like they do, act like they do, have the same physiology as us, and so on. If we assume they are robots or zombies, we are left with too many unanswered questions. Nothing in the zombie or robot theory explains why they act the way they do, unless we hypothesize the existence of unseen causes, demonic 'puppet masters', or the like. So given what we do know, the theory that other people have minds has much greater explanatory power than alternative theories. That gives us a good reason to prefer it.

If we combine these principles with our insights into provability, we can now return to the Bin Laden tapes. The demand for conclusive proof that they are genuine can now be seen as a red herring. Rather we should use abduction to see which is the best explanation of the tape's existence on the balance of evi-

dence. To help weigh up this evidence, we can consider which explanation best fits in with the established facts, which is the most economical, and which has the greater explanatory power.

When we apply these principles to the Bin Laden tapes I think we should conclude that the best explanation is that the tapes are genuine. The alternative theory suffers from the same weaknesses as other conspiracy theories. First, it requires us to accept many facts which are not established. This is the strength and weakness of conspiracy theories. They hypothesize huge amounts of suppressed information, which means that the unavailability of the evidence is part of the conspiracy story itself. But while this makes disproving the theories hard, since the evidence isn't available, it leaves us with no reasons actually to accept the theory as true. Second, the explanation is not simple, since it requires us to accept that all sorts of people have been involved in a complex deception and none of this has yet been discovered. In contrast, the explanation that the tape is genuine—though it leaves some questions unanswered—is simple. Third, it leaves many things unexplained—perhaps more than the rival theory—such as why no one has been able to show the tape is a fake, how exactly such a fake was made, and why no other counter-evidence to the tape's authenticity has been uncovered.

Using an abductive method to decide what the truth is does require us to accept some limitations on our knowledge. First, we can often expect, as in this case, that the account we accept will leave some things unexplained. If we accept the tape is genuine, we still don't know how or why the recording was made and how it got into US hands. Incompleteness of explanation

just has to be lived with sometimes. What we have to avoid doing is filling in the missing details with wild speculation or making the mistake of supposing that an incomplete explanation is a fundamentally wrong explanation. I cannot explain to you how the magician saws a person in two, but I am sure it is an illusion. (Not least because the magician admits it is an illusion!) It seems to me that philosophers are often criticized for always demanding rational explanations. I think it is fairer to say that philosophers demand either explanations that are rational or none at all. On the whole, philosophers would rather just accept that some things are unexplained than accept a wild explanation just because it's the only one on offer.

A second limitation we have to accept is that our knowledge in such instances is fallible. We could be wrong. It could turn out that the tape is a hoax. We may reject a hundred different conspiracy theories only to discover that one of them is in fact correct. To this we can only say it is unfortunate that this must be so. The idea that knowledge must be in some way infallible is philosophically immature. If we are to understand as best we can what knowledge is, we have to accept the limits on what we can know.

### Truth revisited

Earlier I rejected a crude relativism and suggested that we need to accept that there is a difference between what we take to be true and what is true. However, it should be noted that the abductive method is associated with the pragmatist school of philosophy, which does not hold a realist view of knowledge.

Rather, what is true is 'what works'. Put crudely, it is true that petrol is flammable because if you set light to it, it will burn. The atomic theory is true because, if you suppose it to be true, you can do all sorts of things like create nuclear bombs or power stations.

It should be clear that this has nothing to do with crude relativism. It cannot be true for you that petrol burns and not true for me, since what happens when I put a match to petrol is just what happens if you do. 'What works' is independent of us. For this reason, in practice, being a pragmatist is much more like being a realist than a crude relativist. A pragmatist does not think that what we think is true is the same as what is true, since we may think something to be true which 'doesn't work'. This is why the pragmatist, although a non-realist, can argue that the Bin Laden tapes either are or are not genuine.

I mention this point briefly because I think it illustrates how philosophy often 'leaves the world as it is', as Wittgenstein put it. The disagreement between realists and non-realists is about the fundamental nature of truth and falsehood. However, this often does not change how we should talk about truth and falsehood at the level of everyday discourse. When philosophers get together and one of them says that they think the president is telling a lie, for example, they do not usually get into a discussion about what truth is. They might do, but in such a case they are examining the question of what it means to tell a lie, not whether the president actually lied or not. When considering the second question, their discussion is likely to be very similar to that of any other, hopefully intelligent, person.

## Conclusion

Bringing together the two threads of this chapter—truth and knowledge—we arrive at a view which is measured and undogmatic, but it isn't an 'anything goes' view. Philosophy should lead, I think, to intellectual modesty. We should be careful not to assert with absolute conviction that we and we alone know the truth. We have to accept that most of what passes for knowledge cannot be proved beyond all doubt. All we can do is reason carefully about what the evidence suggests and reach our conclusions accordingly, always mindful that we could be wrong. Hand in hand with this modesty comes a rejection of false intellectual generosity. Not all points of view are equally 'valid' except in the sense that we all have the right to believe what we will. Simply to claim that truth is in the eye of the beholder is the end of all attempts at intelligent discourse. Similarly, though we may not be able to prove all our beliefs, some are better supported by argument and by experience than others. Philosophy leads us to accept that there are certain standards by which we can judge claims to know the truth, but also that these judgements can never be made with absolute certainty. It is the measured path between absolute dogmatism on the one side and total relativism on the other.

Perhaps the greatest lesson we have learned from philosophers about knowledge is that scepticism is a game which you can't stop people playing if they are determined to do so. Like a court jester, the sceptic can continue to dance and laugh, teasing us with his cries of 'But how can you be sure?' and 'It all might be wrong'. The sceptical jester may have a value in that he may constantly remind us that everything is indeed uncertain. But by

always being sceptical, the jester has missed the crucial point—lack of absolute certainty is unavoidable. That's the way the world is. But that is no reason to believe that we can't pursue truth and knowledge. It is simply a reason for us to do so humbly.

It can be sobering to apply these lessons to our reading of current affairs. Something like the war on terrorism is a serious and concerning matter. Some people respond to situations like this by becoming dogmatic and militant. I have not addressed these people directly in this chapter since I would hope that the broad philosophical approach I have set out is, as a whole, a kind of argument against them. I have concerned myself with those who reject dogmatism and replace it with a kind of intellectual despair, a suspension of judgement based on the idea either that there is no truth out there or that we can't know it anyway. The alternative is, I suggest, to accept that there is something we rightly call the truth, even if it is not quite what realists take to be truth, and that our knowledge of this truth is fallible and uncertain. It is harder to struggle to make sense of the news following this path than it is to suspend judgement or dogmatically cling to a fixed viewpoint. But it is, I believe, the only philosophically justifiable way to proceed.