The Conception of Truth and its Meontological Preconditions [zřejmě 1992]

„... being is no easier to describe in its true characters than non-being.“ (Plato, The Sophist)

In the European tradition every drive for knowledge represents drive for knowledge of truth, i.e. authentic knowledge of reality. Neither individual cases of skepticism nor entire periods thereof have changed any of this and have only contributed to new attempts at purifying and gaining a better understanding of this ideal. And this, coincidentally, has evoked a a need for a new understanding of the nature of truth. The history of philosophy's attempts at a conception of truth up to the present shows poor prospects for the efforts at converting truth and authenticity or veracity into something conceptually easier to grasp. No matter what we establish as a criterion for veracity, in the end it always transpires that what we have on our hands is, in the best of cases, only a kind of guideline instead of a final yardstick—which always remains only truth itself.

One of the oldest and most firmly rooted conceptions of truth is the so-called correspondence theory of truth. It is, at first sight, quite simple: if an account corresponds to reality, it is true. Actually, though, this conception raises insurmountable difficulties. For usually we do not compare an account to reality but only to another account. Deciding whether the two accounts of the same reality are in agreement or not, is by no means an easy task, and again it is a question of veracity or the lack thereof, and not just a „mere“ comparison. And should we still, at least in theory, want to insist on comparing the accounts with reality itself, would have to admit that the account is in no way (relevant to to the question of veracity) like the reality it is supposed to be an account of. Besides, there remains the trouble that without looking we don't know what something looks like and without listening what it sounds like. In order to be able to compare our knowledge with reality itself, we would have to jump out of our skin and approach reality without ourselves.

One of the most recent but already firmly entrenched conceptions of truth is the one that takes as its criteria praxis, utility and what we take to be results. These days surely no one any longer perceives praxis and theory as human approaches devoid of common ground or even mutually exclusive. Aristotle defined the difference between theoretical and practical sciences according to their different aims, the aim of theoretical sciences being truth, that of practical ones, on the other hand, performance or result. In our time even the most theoretical science cannot do without experimentation, that is, without a specific praxis. (And anyway, thinking too is a kind of praxis.) But how could praxis determine a theory's veracity or lack thereof, if the results were not theoretically analyzed and interpreted? Bad praxis, i.e. praxis not grounded in theory, cannot be a proper criterion for a theory's veracity. And how do we recognize what is useful and what is not? At what results will we pause and use them for substantiating the truthfulness of some theory?

Although all scientific knowledge stands and falls with its relation to truth, no special discipline has at its disposal either the cognitive other means that would allow it to give a competent account of what truth is, and properly to substantiate such an account. In a certain sense Aristotle's statement that the science (knowledge) of truth is philosophy remains valid to this day; but it remains valid in new circumstances and in different conditions, the special sciences having separated from philosophy and being, in more than one regard, pitted directly against it. The sciences have divided reality among themselves, and each takes care only of one of its parts or aspects. No science is interested in whether something got lost in the shuffle at this dividing of the world. No wonder that sometimes it seems that there is nothing left to philosophy but to glean after the sciences or wait for crumbs to fall from the table of its new masters. But should truth itself be one of these „crumbs,“ then we would have to question very seriously the justification for the self-confidence of the one side and the resignation of the other.

Ancient tradition ascribes coinage of the word „philosophy“ to Pythagoras and suggests also the reason for this choice of name: genuine philosophy is not wisdom but love of wisdom. If previous experience with attempts to come up with a readily available and absolutely reliable criterion for the veracity of some account or theory are to be trusted, then we must allow the truth of Spinoza's

words that the truth is the only and highest criterion of itself (and also of error). For this reason we are disinclined to understand philosophy as knowledge (or even science) of truth and would rather think of it as love of truth; not, then, EPISTEMETÉS ALÉTHEIAS, but FILALÉTHEIA. Truth can never be achieved by the accumulation of individual pieces of information, but only by devoted attention to truth itself and an expectant listening whether it might perhaps address and in that way reach us.

But why should something like this be so very unpopular among scientists? Why does the majority of them continue to cling to the prejudicial stereotype of the correspondence of thinking to reality? This surely has its own causes, the same ones which prevent modern science from being truly scientific in the full meaning of the word. The basis of all European and Europeaninfluenced thought is the invention of concepts and its introduction into the praxis of thought. Whereas thought acts themselves (and stream of consciousness, in general) are always something unique and essentially unidentifiable with any other act (at most there can be greater or lesser similarities), the invention of concepts has allowed thought to focus on always the same object. The interpretation of concept-use itself or of its results has not remained unchanged, with considerable errors made especially at the beginning—errors with which the birth of philosophy, to be sure, is inseparably connected.

The most important question of the first philosophers, namely that about the origins or roots of all things, could have been meaningfully asked only within a framework of conceptual thought capable of thematizing the cardinal difference between what is subject to change and what—underneath all change—remains without movement. The error, or rather, the contagious disease from which European thought has not yet completely recovered and whose consequences it has not yet managed to overcome, lay in the hypostasis of the unchangeable and self-identical as a kind of independent and highest reality, as the true reality. Many a confusion known from the history of European thought can be credited to this aberrant interpretation. Nevertheless, there is no need for bitter regret of this epoch-making error, for it has turned out to be a most productive one. Yet even its remarkable productivity cannot be sufficient grounds for persisting in it.

From at least the time of Brentano and Husserl on there has been fairly wide-spread awareness of what is called intentionality of consciousness, i.e., the peculiar feature that consciousness and thinking are always consciousness and thinking of (or about) something. Yet the issue is far from clarified; especially in the public mind it is associated with more than one wrong notion. Thus, for example, although it is easy to grasp that a triangle as a figure on a plane has three apices and three sides but the concept of triangle does not, the difference between a concept and that of which it is a concept (i.e. its intentional object) is often disregarded. At other times it is being forgotten that we must respect the difference between intentional and real objects, and remember that one and the same real object may be meant by different concepts (e.g., by concepts of different generality), while every concept has concept has its own noninterchangeable intentional object without which, after all, it is not identifiable at all. The characteristic difficulty with language is the common usage of the same word for a number of real objects of the same kind, for a range of concepts that relate to them, and also for their appropriate intentional objects.

An important advantage of conceptual thought is the factually achieved distance of the thought from that which is being thought, whether the thinker be immediately aware of it or not. Sooner or later this mode of thinking is inevitably subjected to reflection, and thus there follows a gradual disclosing of its nature—its unfolding possibilities and, of course, its limits as well. Although, to be sure, when it comes to an understanding of the nature of truth, the correspondence conception fatally misses the mark, it ultimately does have some undeniable support. Certainly, there is no correspondence or likeness between the concept dog and a real dog; on the other hand, dog as an intentional object (e.g., the taxonomic unit canis familiaris) does, for all that, have something in common with a real dog (or real dogs). The concept „dog“ does not bite, has no hair, and does not run on all fours; a dog as a cognitive construct is endowed with all the equally constructed attributes that characterize all the canidae, plus those the canis familiaris as a cognitively established model of the species evinces.

The model, it is true, does not really exist, but as an intentional object it is endowed with a constructed „life.“

A fundamental disadvantage of conceptual thought (at least in the form in which it was invented and established in ancient Greece and in which it still predominates in our thinking) is its influence on how reality is revealed to us and how it appears to us. Because the essence of thinking in concepts involves the concentration of one kind of intentions (we might call them objective intentions) on one projection plane which is an intentional object, and some reality is then meant with the aid of said intentional object, the latter's objectivity is by extension projected into reality itself and consequently appears to us as objective, as an object. That is why it is also possible to talk about objective thinking; the thinking behaves as a template which lets through and allows to be revealed to us clearly only some parts of reality, whereas others it seems to filter out or at least distort. To objective thinking reality appears as objective: this means that those parts of reality which permits it, are objectified, while others are suppressed or pushed out of our awareness and cognition.

The most significant consequences of this characteristic of objective thinking concern our conscious relation not to realities. which in addition to an „objective“ also have some „nonobjective“ aspect, but to those which have no objectifiable characteristic at all. Such realities then become something unreal to objective thought, because after objectification nothing remains of them; they are completely filtered out. The world as it „offers“ itself to our awareness regulated by incessant objectifying is completely devoid not only of some of those of its characteristics that defy objectivization but also, and above all, of all true nonobjectivity. The special sciences, then, have divided among themselves a „world“ thus impoverished and quite robbed, without even noticing that they were dividing only piles of objects which had long ceased to be the universe, the unified world, reality as a whole.

But the fact that in the tradition of objective thinking all nonobjectivity escapes thematization does not in any way mean that it is actually not present. It is part of the very nature of objective intentions to be tied to, indeed, to be dependent on and downright derived from nonobjective intentions. In ordinary conversation we pay attention not only to what is being said, but always also to what— specifically—is not being said, what— specifically—remains unspoken. And because there is no fundamental difference between speaking and thinking, it holds here too that to think something always at the same time means to not think something (and that not only in a formal logical sense, but actually to specifically not think something) and that all thinking is therefore essentially connected with that which is not thought (specifically not thought). And it is exactly here, where objective thinking comes to its end, where it reaches its limits and assumes there to be „nothing“ more beyond these limits, that possibilities are opening up for thinking of a type other than the objective one, „nonobjective“ thinking which to objective thinking appears as nonor at least improper thinking.

From what has been said so far it will be obvious that we would like to submit to the reader's consideration the question whether a most suitable „nonobject“ of nonobjective thinking might not be truth as pure nonobjectivity and ergo as defying every attempt at objectification and grasping by objective thinking. At the same time it cannot but be plain as day that the radical jump into the realm of pure nonobjectivity appears, in this seeming arbitrariness and uncontrolability, much less persuasive than it would be in the case of a reality furnished with both aspects, traditional objective thinking being transparent only to one of them, with the other filtered out and seemingly annulled. A short digression to realities of this type representing a kind of twin crystal of objective and nonobjective aspects (we should, more precisely, speak of objectifiable and nonobjectifiable aspects) may be all the more useful as it will point out some prospects for a cognitive „approach“ to entirely nonobjective reality.

As Aristotle once said, the relation in which something stands to „being“ (EINAI) is the same in which it stands to truth. With the exact meaning of what he had in mind at the time we would have to

argue, but as a starting point an only approximate meaning will do; later we will reach a more accurate definition which, however, will be different from Aristotle's. If we differentiate between true entities (internally integrated wholes) and false entities (mere aggregates of, in the final analysis, true entities) and disregard borderline or transitional cases, we can—contrary to the ancient Greeks—understand the statement about some true entity, that it is, in two ways. Either we have in mind an immediate existence, that is, a man's state at an exactly defined time, for example, or his being, that is, his life as a whole. Which relation to „being“ is actually relevant in comparison with the relation to truth?

In the course of his life a man changes: first he is an infant, then he babbles, later still he learns to talk; is child, adolescent, man, old man, and so forth. One excludes the other, he cannot be all of that at one and the same time. When he is one thing he is either no longer or not yet the other. Yet when we speak of (or have in mind) a certain man, it is only in exceptional circumstances that we are concerned with his immediate existence in this or that situation and moment; usually, we are concerned with the man's whole life, connecting his past with his present and respecting also his future. To us (and even more so to himself) he is one man. All of his life, from his birth to his death, he „is“ in the sense of being. In contrast, from the point of view of existence he predominantly „is not,“ because his momentary existence is almost „nothing“ compared to the predominance of his whole past and future life.

Objective thinking constructs a cognitive model of a „man“ who remains the same and undergoes no change his whole life long, and it identifies this construct with the man as he „fundament-ally“ is (fundament—that which remains at the bottom of superficial changes). Something similar, for that matter, holds for all change: that „which“ changes, actually does not change; that „which“ evolves de facto does not evolve. In a like manner the „man“ who remains the same throughout his life actually does not live, life being only a long series of changes on the surface, while below the surface there is invariability and identity, which is to say, the opposite of life. This is what the contradictory and paradoxical outcomes of objective—also known as metaphysical—thinking looks like.

A circumstance of extreme importance here is that objectively thinking man does not actually know what exactly he is doing when he is thinking objectively. In spite of the fact that objective thinking is made possible by and grounded in philosophy (in ancient Greece), and that philosophy first and foremost is incessant selfcontrol and reflection on what we are doing when we think, objective thinking loses this ability for reflection, reflection ceases to be its activity and becomes alienated from it—as if it were something coming from outside, from somewhere else. This also defines the major contradiction of modern science (more precisely: of modern sciences, for a unified science does not exist). Since long ago it has been anchored in the very concept of knowledge that the one who knows, knows very well what he does and does not know. But the modern sciences relate specifically only to their own subjects; in relation to themselves, i.e., to their (primarily intellectual) procedures they are clearly incompetent, lacking the necessary cognitive means (which are completely different from those at their disposal within the framework of their special competence), and thus they are often forced to cooperate with the one intellectual discipline that has (at least in principle) not lost that competence, namely philosophy.

For this cooperation between the special sciences and philosophy to be propitious, philosophy must fulfill certain demands, the essential being the capacity for approaching critically the phenomenon of so-called objective thinking. Understandably, such a demand is not met by a philosophy that is itself completely immersed in the current of objective thinking, but only by one that, at least in some regards, has achieved a certain distance from it. Only this kind of approach, after all, is truly philosophical, for philosophy lives by reflection, which means a stepping back for the purpose of new approaching and new seeing. From this point of view every philosophy that cooperates with science and drives some of the problems not only out of its sphere of interest but also even out of the general awareness, must arouse certain suspicions. (The taboo concept of „concept“ in modern logic might serve as one example for all.)

If we make penetratability of reflection a criterion for philosophicalness of thinking, a new perspective at the history of philosophy and the greatness of its representatives opens up to us. But its consequences for living philosophical thought and its selfunderstanding will be no less important. Characteristic of all systematic thinking is, firstly, the points of departure by which it is anchored in the concrete intellectual climate; then, the principles and rules by which it is governed; and, finally, the overall strategy it follows in its procedures. However, should reflectivity, i.e., the perpetual striving for reflection on everything philosophy has undertaken and is undertaking, become its supreme need and principle, this will inevitably lead to some extremely important relativization of both its points of departure and its principles, but, over and above all this, to the relativization of its strategies. For if in one of its components reflectivity means distance, then this is of necessity also a distance from our hitherto accepted points of departure, principles and strategies as well.

The goal of stepping back as the first important component of reflection is not a mere casting doubt on the intellectual attainment to date (that would be too cheap), but finding a new outlook and more suitable perspective in which the true face of our actual intellectual undertaking will reveal itself (and thereby the true face of that at which our thinking was aimed, as well). This can surely not be achieved definitively and once and for all, for reflection must be followed by and subjected to reflection (new reflection), whether or not it revealed and opened new paths, that is, regardless of whether it showed some degree of success. In any case, the rationale for stepping back consists in its providing a new, better approach, a new, better perception of reality. But his, in principle, is impossible in the form of strategic reasoning. A decisive component of reflection is its openness toward truth, an openness which does not follow from either the nature of the cognitive point of departure or the principles and rules that govern thinking. It is an openness toward truth which can show in the right light both our points of departure and the principles and rules we follow, as well as our strategies; that light, however, will be unfavorable, casting doubt upon them. The willingness to allow doubt to be cast upon one's thinking and its points of departure is a fundamental precondition of philosphicalness, if we are to understand philosophy as respect for truth not to be weakened, as—indeed—the ultimate and supreme devotion to, yes, even love of truth.

But what is truth?, a Pilate seemingly philosophizing yet in reality evading the issue, might ask. But there is a hidden error in the very question, the question itself already being a first false step. Truth is not „something," which is to say, it is not some objective and objectively apprehensible reality. Truth shows reality in the right light, from the right visual angle, shows it in the context of a whole not reduced to mere objectivities; or rather: truth itself is this right light in which things, events and beings show their true face. Truth cannot be conceptually molded into intentional objects, and neither can it be constructed or objectified; it can only be apprehended nonobjectively and as if „incidentally" (as it erroneously seems to us) when we attempt objective apprehension of some concrete reality. For the objective intentions must continue to be organized and concentrated. Objective thinking cannot simply be repudiated and discarded, but must be brought to greater perfection by cultivating and „organizing" (though differently) its nonobjective intentions.

Does this mean that truth is conceptually inapprehensible? The answer will depend on our understanding of conceptual thought. As long as we identify it with the tradition of European thought so far, which with the aid of concepts has constructed intentional objects and through their templates then perceived realities as objective, the answer must be negative: truth can indeed not be conceived of in this way. A return to pre-conceptual thinking is impossible, reliance on extra-conceptual (e.g., poetic) thinking insufficient. Everything points to the only prospect being a radical restructuring of conceptual thinking or, in other words, a fundamental reconstruction of „intentional objects" and a changed understanding of their entire sphere.

Philosophy cannot forgot not only the real relation of devotion to truth, but also that conception which captures the truth as exactly and profoundly as possible. This is why it must once and for all part with that branch of its own tradition which has put insuperable obstacles in the path of philosophy's grasping the true nature of its relation to truth, of its finally perceiving that relation in

the light of truth and not in the light of its own cognitive methods, that is. But because in the traditional view truly nonobjective reality appears as non-reality or, put differently: because nonobjective „existing“ appears as a nonexisting, it is necessary, at least for the transitional period, to build a new philosophical discipline that will be capable of thematizing and intellectually examining this area of the real which is nonobjectifiable and thus ungraspable by objective thinking.

In the traditional ontology the existing is examined with regard to its „being,“ i.e., the extent to which it „is.“ We have shown that this „is“ can have a dual meaning, namely that it means either actual (and thus immediate) existing or being in the sense of „life“ (unified continuity). Viewed from the former angle, each concrete entity truly „exists“ only in its actual existing, whereas in its being it is on the whole largely „nonexistent.“ Traditional thought avoided this fundamental absurdity by relativizing the meaning of time and temporality, thus incongruently taking as existing also „past existing“ and „future existing“ without being concerned about their mutual relation. The same unacceptable tendency can still be observed in contemporary attempts at understanding. time as a dimension analogous to the spatial dimensions.

From the position of traditional ontology it appears unavoidable to regard truth (in the sense discussed) as nonexistent, that is, as a non-entity. But because the overwhelming majority of philosophers do not regard it as compatible with philosophical conscience to proclaim truth to be „nothing,“ they attempt to make it into „something,“ a relation or complex of relations, for instance. Such attempts, however, do not stand up to strict criticism. That is why it is necessary to establish, alongside and in opposition to ontology in the traditional sense, meontology as a philosophical discipline about the non-existent, more precisely, about that reality about which it is impossible legitimately to testify that it „is,“ although it „is“ real and therefore in no case falls together with „nothing“ or „nothingness.“ The philosophers' awareness that being cannot rightfully be understood as existing (i.e, as an entity, even if it be an entity of the highest order) goes back a rather long time; here and there, in the thought of some outstanding medieval thinkers, for instance, it seeps through.

Like every philosophical discipline, meontology too will of necessity relate to the whole, so that it will have something to say to all the other philosophical disciplines which it will penetrate and by which it will be penetrated in turn. It seems unlikely, therefore, that ontology and meontology could exist side by side in perpetuity; we can take it as plausible either that meontology will play only a transitional role in a period in which ontology has to undergo great structural changes, or that meontology will gradually take over the tasks of ontology and render it obsolete (then, of course, the name meontology—from the Greek ME ON = nonexistent—will cease being functional and meaningful).

Naturally, truth will not remain the only topic of meontology, even though it will always be one of its major concerns. Just as until now it has been possible to analyze the ontological preconditions of the conception of truth, it will now become necessary to discover and analyze its meontological preconditions. That means that where the ontic structure of the subject (conscious or preconscious), action, reflectivity, etc. has been studied by constructing appropriate intentionally objective models, now there will have to be brought to light those components and relations that escape all objectification. Thus, in time meontology will have to demonstrate its legitimacy and functionality even at certain philosophically relevant near-neuralgic problem-points of the special sciences (especially the natural sciences). The matter will not be without problems, considering the continued existence of the objective mode of thinking in the natural sciences in particular. Yet it should be possible to utilize their own experiences with being forced to formulate questions under whose impact old thinking literally crumbles (it is perhaps most conspicuous in microphysics and astrophysical cosmology).

A fundamental precondition for a meontological conception of truth is a discerning and cognitive managing of the relation between objectivity and nonobjectivity in those specific cases in which they coalesce in an „event-ual“ occurring. A second significant precondition is an understanding and

cognitive elaboration of the reality of the direct relation between true nonobjectivity and the nonobjective aspect of every individual event (true in the sense of an internally united event). A third point of utmost importance is finding that component of reflectivity which is capable of meeting true nonobjectivity in the midst of its own course. A fourth precondition, finally, is an apperception and articulation of the real nature of the mutual bond between the nonobjective appeal or address and the historical situation in which it takes place and is understood or overheard. Distinguishing between an „event-ual“ and an „extra-event-ual“ occurring will be an outcome and fruit rather than a precondition of such reflections; this will help to reveal the nonobjective „dynamis“ with which the truth is furnished and on the basis of which it does (or does not) enter into a specific and always unique relation with respective individual events or subjects.

Nonobjective thinking must be led out of the shadow and out of forgetfulness and must be established in a form as sophisticated as was attained by objective thinking. In order to accomplish this task, appropriate topics must be chosen for the first stage. One of the most appropriate is truth. The inevitable cognitive breakthrough cannot, however, be achieved through new perception and treatment of individual problems, but only in the form of the systematically developed new philosophical discipline only preliminarily and intentionally provocatively called meontolgy. Only within the framework of this new discipline in which a new, that is, a nonobjective (nonobjectifying) mode of thinking must already be manifest, will it be possible to find the necessary preconditions and appropriate points of departure for formulating an adequate conception of truth.

Translated by Milan Pomichalek and Anna Mozga