THE LIFE OF TRUTH[*]
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The metaphor of truth having a life helps consider the relations between truth and time. In what respects is truth dependent on time? Has truth a life? Are there any living truths? Are there any dead truths? The metaphor is not to be intended in the sense of truth having an ending life. The thesis I want to defend is this: For every truth T, T is either eternal or immortal. To put it differently, I claim that truth is permanent (not temporary). So the complete title of this paper should be 'The never-ending life of truth'.

Sections 1 and 2 deal with eternal and immortal truths respectively and the grounds for making their distinction. In Section 3, I ask whether such a distinction holds for falsities as well and conclude it does. In Section 4 some consequences of the distinction are drawn. Finally, in Section 5 some hard cases are considered.

1. Eternal Truths

A preliminary question I won't deal with is what the truth-bearers are, what 'true' is predicated of. Are they propositions, sentences, statements, beliefs? I do not think that an answer it essential to the theses I will argue for. The main claim of this paper is that, whatever a truth-bearer is, truth is either eternal or immortal[1].

Our first question is: Is truth dependent on time? There are truths which are not dependent on time. Consider the following:

(1) $2 + 2 = 4$.

Truths as (1) are absolute truths, that is not dependent on time. These I shall call *Eternal Truths*. (I leave aside considerations on mathematical objects: if you are an intuitionist, take it as a fungible example). Beside there are truths which are dependent on time. Consider the following:

(2)   Caesar crossed the Rubicon.

Truths as (2) are relative truths, that is dependent on time. In what sense, one may ask, are they dependent on time? They have a date of birth. Before 49 BC, it wasn't true that Caesar crossed the Rubicon. After 49 BC, it is. In this sense, truths as (2) are dependent on time, while truths as (1) are not, since the latter are always such. (To put it in modal terms, absolute truths are necessary truths, relative truths are contingent truths.) These are the grounds for making such a distinction, but a further question must be posed concerning the relative truths.

2. Immortal Truths

The question concerning the relative truths is this: Must we distinguish between past, present, and future truths? If truth has a life, why not distinguish the (living) truths of the present and the (non-living) truths of the past and future? Compare the following examples:

[1] Another question I won't deal with is the relation between truth and meaning. On truth, the past, and theories of meaning cf. Dummett 1969, McDowell 1978, Dummett 2003.

(2)   Caesar crossed the Rubicon
(3)   Paris is the capital of France
(4)   A sea-fight will occur tomorrow.

One may think at the following hypothesis: present cases like (3) are living truths, since Paris is presently the capital of France; past cases like (2) are no more living truths, since Caesar is not presently crossing the Rubicon; future cases like (3) are not yet living truths, since the sea-fight is not occurring now. Thus one may think that past cases are dead truths and future cases are not yet living truths, for the only kind of living truths are present truths.

This is not the correct picture of the relations between truth and time. It is true that truth may have a life, but not in this sense. For, once a truth is such, it remains forever such. Once true, forever true. It is obviously true that Caesar is not presently crossing the Rubicon, but this does not imply in any sense that it is no more true that in 49 BC Caesar crossed the Rubicon. Once a truth becomes such, nothing can change it and turn it into falsity. History goes on indeed, but the truths of the past cannot be turned into falsities. Think of the absurd consequences of the contrary hypothesis: it would imply that it is both true and false that in 49 BC Caesar crossed the Rubicon.

Thus, if I am right, we must recognize that past and present truths do have a date of birth but do not have a date of death. Once they are born, so to say, they have a never-ending life. These I shall call *Immortal Truths*.

Notice the difference between eternal truths and immortal truths. *Eternal Truths* do not have a date of birth nor of death. *Immortal Truths* have a date of birth but not of death.

Now what about future cases like (4)? Once a relative truth becomes such, it never dies. But cases like (4) are not yet truths. Unless determinism is a correct picture of the world and history (which I do not believe but cannot discuss here), the future is open. Presently is neither true nor false that a sea-fight will occur tomorrow. So, (4) is presently neither true nor false.

To resume about relative truths. Past and present truths are immortal truths; future truths are not really truths. (An interesting question which I cannot treat here is when and how a present truth becomes a past truth).

By consequence, the main thesis of this paper is demonstrated: For every truth T, T is either eternal or immortal, since it is either an absolute truth as (1) or a relative truth as (2) and (3), while cases like (4) are not truths.

Notice that claiming the never-ending life of truth, the permanence of truth, does not commit one to the bivalence principle. The question is not: For every statement S, S is either true or false. It is rather: For every true statement TS, TS is forever true (either eternally or immortally).

3. Eternal and Immortal Falsities?

Does the same distinction applies to falsities? Is it the case that a falsity is either eternal or immortal? Consider the following:

(1′) $2 + 2 = 5$.

This seems to be an eternal falsity, while (1) is an eternal truth. Such a falsity is not dependent on time. Now consider the following:

(2′)   Caesar crossed the Mississippi.

This is not an eternal falsity, since in principle it was not impossible for Caesar to cross the Mississippi. Actually it didn't happen and then, after the death of Caesar, we are entitled to say that (2′) is an immortal falsity. Such a falsity is dependent on time and has a date of birth, namely the

death of Caesar or whatever date in Caesar's life we take (2′) as referring to and at which he didn't cross the Mississippi. But consider the next example:

(3′)   Paris is the capital of Russia.

This is not an eternal falsity, since in principle it is not impossible for Paris to become one day the capital of Russia. Actually it is not the case, but one day it might happen. So, this is not an eternal falsity but whether it is an immortal falsity is not clear. It is obviously dependent on time, but the difference with (2′) is that the possibility stated by (2′) passed away, while the possibility stated by (3′) is still open to realization. On the other hand, if we take the statement as referring to particular spatio-temporal circumstances, we must take (3′) as saying that, a s we are concerned, in 2005 Paris is not the capital of Russia. In this sense it is an immortal falsity, since nothing can turn it into truth. It might happen one day that Paris becomes the capital of Russia, but that would not turn into truth the false statement that in 2005 Paris is the capital of Russia.

The conclusion to be extracted from that is that both falsities concerning the past and the present are immortal falsities. (As to statements about the future, the problem does not rise if we take them to be, as I said in the previous Section, neither true nor false).

To resume about falsities. Falsities which are not dependent on time are *eternal* falsities. Falsities which are dependent on time are *immortal* falsities. So it is clear that there is, if I am correct, a perfect symmetry with the thesis concerning truth. For every falsity F, F is either eternal or immortal.

4. Consequences of the Distinction

Consider some important consequences of the distinction between eternal and immortal truths (or falsities). For instance some consequences concerning their knowledge. In general, inquiring is justified since truth is permanent (were it temporary, it wouldn't). As to eternal truths, conceptual inquiry and analysis is justified since they are always true. As to relative truths, empirical and historical inquiry is justified since past and present truths never die. The evidence at our disposal may be scarce or inadequate, or lacking. If evidence of *p* is lacking, we are in the incapacity of asserting *p*. But this does not mean that truth is assertability (cf. Putnam 1999, 49-59). For some empirical statements at least, we must recognize a gap between what *p* says and what counts as a proof of *p* (cf. Dummett 2003, 32-34). If truth were assertability, the content of *p* would be identical with the proof of *p*, that which is incorrect. The difficulty of identifying truth with assertability is evidence in favor of our claiming the permanence of truth. Assertability is a mortal property. Truth and falsity are not. Furthermore, consider the role of new evidence ruling out a previously accepted hypothesis: we conclude that the hypothesis was *though of* as true, not that it turned from truth into falsity[2]. (Otherwise the sense of inquiring itself would be completely different.)

There are also practical consequences. It is the permanence of truth that determines the practical usefulness of true beliefs. Some pragmatists claimed that truth is usefulness and that a true belief becoming useless stops being true (cf. James 1907). They claimed, in this sense, that truth is temporary. Our practical experience counts as evidence for the opposite, as more acute pragmatists recognized (cf. Ramsey 1927, Dokic and Engel 2002). The truth-conditions of a belief are identical with the success-conditions of an action based on that very belief.

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[2] "The geocentric hypothesis in astronomy is a case in point; we regard it not as a superseded truth, but as a former theory which never was in reality true. If any judgment is really true, the presumption is in favour of its predicate always remaining the idea which will represent the reality sufficiently for all purposes which ought to be recognised in making the judgment." (Macintosh 1912, 180)

5. Hard Cases

There are hard cases contending indeed our previous distinctions. Consider a past or present case on which we have no evidence at all, for instance:

(5)   On the night of his eighteen birthday, Napoleon sneezed three times
(6)   In New Zeeland, 100 persons are actually sneezing.

On the one hand, one may think that these cases are neither true nor false. There are plausible ways to resist such a conclusion (even on non-realist assumptions[3]), in particular conditionalist accounts of the following kind: If someone were present on the night of Napoleon's eighteen birthday, he could have verified the immortal truth or falsity of (5). Similarly: If someone were connected in the appropriated way with everyone actually in New Zeeland, he could verify the immortal truth or falsity of (6). But this issue does not directly impinge on the claim of this paper. Remember the issue is not whether the principle of bivalence holds, but whether truth is permanent (eternally or immortally) or temporary. In this respect we must admit that, as we saw in Section 4, the lack of evidence cannot turn into falsity a true statement or vice versa.

Now consider some harder cases, namely some future cases of which we seem entitled to predicate the truth:

(7)   In the year 3000 the author of this paper will be dead
(8)   The war will provoke a great amount of suffering
(9)   The fire is going to burn the house.

The problem is that, on the one hand, we resist predicating truth-values of statements about the future and that, on the other, some of those statements at least seem to be true. The truth of (7) is grounded in a law of nature concerning human beings. The truth of (8) in the necessary consequences of war. The truth of (9) in the dispositions of fire and of the materials the house is constituted of. Now the question is: What kind of truths are these? These are not eternal truths, for they depend on time. Nor are they immortal truths, for they lack a date of birth. Using the metaphor of life, we might say that these are truths about to be born, truths-to-be. The relevant laws of nature and dispositions make them similar to eternal truths even though they refer to spatio-temporal circumstances as immortal truths do. Whether they are reducible to eternal or immortal truths, remains in my opinion an open question.

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[3] See Dummett (2003, 28) on truth and a justificationist (not strictly verificationist) account of meaning: "a statement about the past could be true if someone at the relevant time could have verified it, even though all reason for asserting it may have blown away."

ABSTRACT

The metaphor of truth having a life explores the relations between truth and time. In what respects is truth dependent on time? Has truth a life? The metaphor is not to be intended in the sense of truth having an ending life. The paper claims the following: For every truth T, T is either eternal or immortal. To put it differently, it claims that truth is permanent (not temporary).
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