Essay Units 13-15: Number 4

'Anti-realism about truth entails that "reality" is our own invention. When it comes to deciding what to believe, anything goes, for according to the anti-realist there are no objectively right or wrong answers to our questions. It follows that there is no difference between reality and a mere dream'. Comment on this attack on the anti-realist theory of truth.

Anti-realism about truth has a broad spectrum of positions. To state that 'there is no difference between reality and a mere dream' is to state an extreme position of anti-realism. The position of anti-realism actually has a number of variations.

One issue that we must clarify is the difference between anti-realism about *meaning in language* and anti-realism about *truth* (or metaphysics). To state a position of anti-realism about truth is to deal with an old philosophical problem about what we know outside of our own minds, how perception limits our knowledge of the world. To state a position of anti-realism about meaning in language is to state a position that might be construed as saying that our words or language **do not intend to** or **cannot** aim for truth 'out there'. But these last two positions are different, and in viewing them we can illustrate a misguided notion of anti-realism in regard to meaning in language.

To state that our language **does not intend to aim** for truth would be to make a claim that what we do with language does not involve or has no need for verification or truth conditions. We use metaphors, we change our statements about issues as we see fit or profitable (politicians are great exponents of this), and we employ vague terms like 'several' or 'old'. In essence we play multiple language games within a set of rules which are understandable between speakers but are not really involved in 'aiming for truth'.

I would argue that this set of 'non-truth' language uses does not remove the *ability* to aim for truth. Most of what we do with language everyday is aiming for truth. It is just that some language games exist (many of those that make our cultures rich, interesting and inspiring) that don't aim for truth. Aiming for truth could be conceived as the most common language game that we play. But it isn't the only one. And the other games won't be reducible to truth conditions in a sensible way. The problem is trying to define all of language as 'aiming for truth'. This is the mistake of the 'truth conditions' project for a theory of meaning. It aims for too much. 'Aiming for truth' is just one use that language is put to (for instance that is what the language of science aims, or should aim for).

However to state that our language **cannot aim for truth** is to argue that language **cannot** have a 'grip on truth'. Whatever verification or correspondence conditions we propose about our use of language, they run up against barriers. These in particular might comprise indeterminate terms that involve the paradox of the heap (when is a heap of sand no longer a heap?), and statements about the past that cannot be verified ('Napoleon believed that Parmenides was correct' even though there is no recorded statement by Napoleon about Parmenides). I would argue that once again that rather than to see these issues (indeterminate terms and statements about the past) as a problem for our aiming for truth, we should rather perceive these types of uses of language as falling within the category of language games that don't aim for truth. If someone asks you 'Do you think Napoleon agreed with Parmenides?' you would hardly expect that either of you are likely to come up with the absolute truth. The game is understood. It's meaning isn't in a truth outcome.

A more significant challenge to realism about meaning of language from the angle that we **cannot aim for truth** would be to argue that we have no way of clarifying the truth of reality with words because of our knowledge of the world is limited by the limitations of perception, and science while a valuable contribution will never 'get there'. In essence, all correspondence theories are doomed to failure by a failure to come up with an adequate theory of epistemology. So how can we ever be aiming for truth when there isn't a way of getting there?

This argument however is a mistaken conception about meaning in language. It has introduced the question about 'realism in regards to truth' into the question of 'realism in regards to meaning'. It may be true that an adequate epistemology is difficult or even impossible to find, but that doesn't indicate that what we mean with our words isn't to try to say what we think is true. Anti-realism about meaning is not a coherent theory because there clearly is a language game (the most common one) where we are trying to verify what we say with 'reality'. Realists about meaning would argue that even if we don't have an adequate epistemological theory we are trying to get to one, and that might be what the whole project of science is about.

Anti-realism about truth is a stronger position (one that is extreme and that few people would even countenance holding). It claims that we don't even know if there is a 'reality' out there at all. This position would argue that since we have no way of clarifying our knowledge of reality it is just as sensible to say that it doesn't exist as to say that it does. Anti-realism about truth in my opinion gets stuck at (close to) Descartes first conclusion 'I think therefore I am'. This rational conclusion does not depend on knowledge of anything outside of me. But to argue anything more is to trust in perceptual capabilities that quite simply aren't trustworthy or reliable.

I would argue that according to Wittgenstein's private language argument that an anti-realist about truth *should* be convinced of a second conclusion. That is that there has to be more than one language user in the world than myself. Descartes could have gone a step further to state that 'I think therefore some other language user exists'. This is because the private language argument insists that a meaningful language cannot have only one language user (and hence a meaningful thought can not occur in a world with one language user).

Following this line of thinking an anti-realist about truth might therefore argue that there are 'no objectively right or wrong answers' to questions relating to our perceptions, but she/he should have to at least concede that they cannot be dreaming all the time. If they never interacted with other language users then they wouldn't even be able to 'think' the question of 'Is anti-realism or realism an accurate description?'.