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ONCE MORE ON RELATIVE TRUTH

A REPLY TO SKILLEN

Sean Sayers

University of Kent at Canterbury

In the articles that Skillen criticizes,¹ I am concerned with the problems posed by the social character of knowledge. To defend realism, I argue, it is necessary to develop a historical account of knowledge, involving relative concepts of truth and falsehood. Although Skillen shares the desire to defend realism, he can see no value in this approach, which he variously describes as 'obfuscating', 'obscuring', and lacking 'rigour' and 'consistency'. Indeed, he cannot even see the problems I am dealing with. The whole exercise is 'unnecessary', he says, 'the social development of science' poses no problems for 'traditional realism' (never further defined) or for the absolute concepts of truth and error.

The Problem of Foundations

Skillen's apparent blindness to these problems is remarkable. They have been central to discussion in epistemology for the past 30 years or so. They are posed not only by the 'social development of science', but by the social nature of knowledge and its justification. Traditional epistemology tries to defend our claims to knowledge by seeking secure foundations for knowledge, either in immediate experience or in a priori reason. The recognition that knowledge is a social phenomenon undermines both approaches. It leads to the conclusion that nothing is given unproblematically in immediate experience, since all experience must be interpreted; and the categories and concepts in terms of which it is interpreted are not universal and necessary products of reason a priori, but social and historical products. In short, all knowledge involves interpretation, and no interpretation can be guaranteed as absolutely correct.

Skillen does not even mention these arguments, let alone show that he has a way of defending 'traditional realism' and the concepts of absolute truth and falsehood against them. For my own part, I believe they pose insuperable difficulties for the traditional approach. These are the problems from which I begin. Drawing on the work of Bradley and other philosophers in the Hegelian tradition I try to develop a historical form of realism which recognizes the social character of knowledge. This involves relative concepts of truth and falsehood.

The Development of Science

These concepts also provide a more satisfactory basis for understanding the development of knowledge. The traditional approach involves the view that theories

¹ S. Sayers, "F.H. Bradley and the Concept of Relative Truth", *Radical Philosophy* 59 (Autumn 1991), pp. 15-20; "Knowledge as a Social Phenomenon", *Radical Philosophy* 52 (Summer 1989), pp. 34-7. For a more extended treatment of these issues, see *Reality and Reason. Dialectic and the Theory of Knowledge*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1985.

must either be absolutely true or absolutely false (or composed of elements which are so). This either/or framework, I argue, makes the development of knowledge incomprehensible.

Skillen is scathing about this claim; but he offers no valid criticism of it. Indeed, after mocking my 'evangelical' language, he in effect concedes the relative account of truth when he says, 'quite simply, any absolute realist would think that current science includes many truths, some falsehoods, many approximations and huge gaps.' What Skillen does not appear to realize is that the notion of an 'approximation' implies the relative concept of truth; an absolute realist like Skillen cannot use it 'consistently', 'rigorously' and 'without obfuscation'.² An approximation is not absolutely true (though something close to it is); according to the absolute conception it must therefore be absolutely false.³ This is not like saying 'if we are not at the North Pole we must be at the South Pole'. Skillen's analogy is defective; what is neither true nor false is not a statement at all. According to the absolute theory, true and false are contradictories not contraries; these 'hyperbolic options' are not of my making, they are entailed by the theory that Skillen is supposed to be defending.

Ewing's Argument

In my article on Bradley (p. 17), I criticize Ewing's argument that 'a judgement can only be partially true or partially false in the sense that it is analyzable into several judgements some of which are absolutely true and others absolutely false'. According to Skillen, however, I myself employ the very procedure I am criticizing. 'I do not see what Sayers finds at stake in his attack on Ewing. Indeed, when he talks about Bradley he finds some things in him true and others false.' Similarly, as Skillen points out, I say the same sort of thing about the phlogiston theory.

Skillen is right to criticize my response to Ewing for its unclarity. Nevertheless, partial or relative truths cannot be dissolved into absolutely true and false elements as Ewing suggests. Of course it is possible to distinguish true and false aspects of a theory; but this vindicates the absolute approach only if these aspects are absolutely true or absolutely false. This is the assumption that Skillen appears to make about my account of phlogiston theory. This theory, I argue, correctly recognized that combustion is a chemical reaction – in that respect it contains an element of truth. However, it is not tenable to regard this as an absolute truth. Its conception of chemical reaction was bound up with eighteenth century conceptions of matter. These were rapidly superseded with its overthrow, opening the way to the development of the atomic theory in the early nineteenth century.

Whenever I claim that something is true or false, Skillen implies that I am inconsistently presupposing the absolute position. There is no basis for this. Thus when I say 'there is no such thing as phlogiston', I am not suggesting this is an absolute truth. As I make clear, it is a relative judgment which can be made only on the basis of, and relative to,

² It should also be noted that the concept of an approximation was introduced by Engels.

³ John Anderson puts this point very clearly in his criticism of Engels that I quote in 'F.H. Bradley', p. 17.

current knowledge of chemistry; and this, to repeat, does not constitute absolute truth, but is social, historical, relative and changing.

Skillen's argument gives out at this point; but a more 'consistent' and 'rigorous' adherent of the absolute theory will press on. If our 'deconstruction' of the phlogiston theory has not yet resulted in absolute truths and absolute falsehoods, that is only because it has not been pursued far enough. The analysis must be continued until we reach the most fundamental level of simple basic observational statements and theoretical categories. These, at least, will be either absolutely true or absolutely false.

Such programmes have been repeatedly attempted in the history of modern philosophy. It is their repeated failure which has led to the present crisis in epistemology. This failure, as I have already suggested, is due to the social and historical character of knowledge. Neither observation nor reason can provide us with absolute truths; both are social and historical in character. Knowledge is social through and through.⁴

The Idea of Development

There are thus good reasons for questioning the absolutism of traditional epistemology. However, this does not mean that we must adopt a pure relativism which maintains that different theories are merely equally possible, equally valid 'ways of seeing things'. The notion of relative truth provides a basis on which to vindicate claims to knowledge and truth.⁵ When we make these claims for current chemistry, for example, we mean that it is true relatively. We mean that it represents an advance in knowledge over previous theories. We mean that it constitutes the best account presently available of its subject matter, and that there are, at present, no equally valid, equally possible alternative accounts in this area.

Skillen objects that such relative judgements must necessarily appeal to an absolute standard. 'How, without a (traditional) realist view, can Sayers speak of knowledge and understanding as growing, as distinct from merely speaking, in a Rorty-sort-of-way, about one view giving way to a later view, neither better nor worse than the other?' Rorty style relativism arises from the belief that different theories are 'incommensurable'. I do question this. Given that different theories can be compared with respect to their truth content, however, it is quite possible to judge that our knowledge has grown without appealing to an absolute standard.

To put the point in general terms, things can be placed in rank order if they can be compared with each other quantitatively in the relevant respect; measurement against an absolute standard in the sense intended by Skillen is not necessary. For example, things can be put in order of height without knowing precisely how high any of them is in absolute terms. In the articles criticized by Skillen, I maintain that this is the sort

⁴ Engels is inconsistent on these issues. While maintaining that knowledge is social, he also holds that some basic statements (e.g., 'Napoleon died on 5 May 1821') are absolutely true (*Anti-Dühring*, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, 1962, Part I ch. IX). I follow Hegel and Bradley here.

⁵ I am puzzled by the title of Skillen's piece, which refers to my 'relativism'. I consistently argue for realism against relativism, as Skillen otherwise seems to recognize.

of judgement we make when we say that current chemistry is true. We mean that it gives a better account of its subject matter than other earlier or currently available alternatives. Assessment against an absolute standard is not involved.

However, problems of commensurability are not the only ones here. The correspondence theory implies that truth can be assessed only by reference to the external and absolute standard of reality. Perhaps Skillen is assuming this view; but he does not spell out his argument sufficiently for this to be clear. However, if, as Bradley maintains, the truth of a theory can be judged by its coherence and comprehensiveness, then it can be judged purely relatively. For these are purely formal and internal criteria, which make no reference to an absolute standard.⁶

Even so, the notion of absolute truth may be involved in a different way. The stages of scientific thought may not simply be parts of a process of relative growth; that process may be a teleological one, moving towards absolute truth as its ultimate end.⁷ So far (and in my previous work as well), I have stressed only the negative point that the notion of the growth of knowledge need not necessarily have this teleological form; but beyond that I have remained uncommitted. However, I am increasingly persuaded that there are good reasons for accepting the idea of absolute truth as the goal of knowledge.⁸ It is difficult to see how an account of the notion of objective truth could avoid positing such a concept. The coherence and correspondence theories both do so; and if pragmatic theories of truth do not, that is because they reject the notion of objective truth.

In the context of Skillen's criticism, however, what needs stressing is that even if it is assumed, the concept of 'absolute truth' in this teleological sense plays no role in the judgements we make about the truth content of particular beliefs or theories. The notion of absolute truth in this sense functions purely as an *ideal*, as a 'regulative' idea, which describes the ultimate end or goal of knowledge, but it plays no 'constitutive' role in our judgements of truth or falsehood. For as I have been emphasising, we make these judgements relatively, and not by the standard of absolute truth in this, or any other, sense.⁹

⁶ The coherence theory is usually associated with idealism, and poses problems for a realist and materialist approach (see *Reality and Reason*, ch. 10).

⁷ I mention this idea, but do not explore it, in my account of Bradley, p. 18.

⁸ My views on this point have been influenced by J.O. Young's arguments in 'Critical Notice of *Reality and Reason*', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 17(2) (June 1987), pp. 491-500.

⁹ Skillen raises a related issue when he notes that although I reject the absolute conception of truth, I 'appeal throughout to an absolute conception of "reality"'. This is implicit in the views I have been defending. Although it seems paradoxical, it is not contradictory provided that the notion of degrees of truth is allowed. For then 'really and truly' is not necessarily a 'repetition': truth may reflect reality only partially. This is also implied by the view that scientific theories are only approximations which, as they develop, reflect reality more and more closely.

The Nature of Falsehood

The other main target of Skillen's criticisms is my account of falsehood. Just as there is no absolute truth, I argue, there is no absolute error. All actual beliefs – indeed all 'ideas', all mental contents – reflect reality in some way and have some content of truth.¹⁰ I do, as Skillen says, put this forward as a philosophical theory – as a 'doctrine', as a 'law' – for reasons that I shall explain in a moment. As such it is a large and controversial thesis which I do not claim to be able to justify in all cases.¹¹ However, I do wish to argue that it provides an illuminating perspective in a number of cases at the centre of philosophical discussion in this field,¹² and that it is not troubled by the objections that Skillen brings against it.

When I dream that I am in an earthquake and I am not, there is a perfectly good sense in which the dream is false. I do not dispute this. The dream is false of the reality it appears to be about. Its 'manifest content', its 'apparent object', is illusory. Traditional epistemology regards dreams as mere illusions and stops at this point. However, psychology since Freud (on whose work I rely here) has not remained content with this. Freud shows that dreams have a meaning, a 'latent content': they can be interpreted. They arise from and express wishes and desires, provoked usually by events of the previous day (and sometimes also by present stimuli, like a stomach ache). When understood in this way, dreams can be seen to be distorted reflections of real (though often unconscious) aspects of our psychology and, in this way, to contain a measure of truth.

Likewise, the phlogiston theory and other false scientific theories, ideologies and religious beliefs, mirages and illusory experiences are all false about their apparent objects. Yet these beliefs are not the absolute errors they are portrayed to be by the traditional approach. We can go some way towards understanding the particular forms they take by relating them to the specific conditions (physical, psychological and social) which give rise to them. In this way, understanding their causes leads to the view that false as well as true ideas reflect reality and contain some measure of truth – not about their apparent objects but about their real causes.¹³

Skillen praises the accounts I give of particular examples, like religious beliefs and mirages. However, he objects to my attempt to generalize them.

¹⁰ Skillen draws attention to my use of the term 'ideas' in this context by his use of quotation marks. I use this term because I wish to refer not only to statements and beliefs, but to all mental contents, including dreams, sensations, emotions, etc.

¹¹ There are a number of cases that I do not know how to handle in these terms.

¹² Including superseded theories, mistaken beliefs, religious ideas, ideologies, illusions, hallucinations, dreams, bodily sensations, emotions. See *Reality and Reason*, chs 4-6, and 'Knowledge as a Social Phenomenon'.

¹³ This point is not confined to cases where 'unconscious awareness' is involved, as Skillen suggests, nor is that notion needed in order to make this point an illuminating one.

This is surely a valid way of thinking about only some false ideas. In some cases at least, it seems to me positively misleading. If I start finding people's behaviour unbearably gross and inconsiderate and it turns out that this is only because a tumour is developing on my brain, it seems to me a big stretch to say that my delusive ideas ... are thereby shown to have a measure of truth about, not them, but my brain.

There is nothing strange in this view, however: a doctor responds to abnormal irritability in just this way when he or she interprets it as symptomatic of – informative about, revealing of – a tumour. In this sense, the irritability, indeed, reflects the presence of the tumour.¹⁴

Two Senses of 'Reflection'

As Skillen says, this account takes the fact that ideas are *caused* by material processes to support the thesis that they *reflect* those processes and contain a measure of truth about them. He raises an objection which is often made to this way of talking when he argues that it runs together two different senses of 'reflection'. The 'minimal causal sense' must be distinguished from the sense in which to say that a belief 'reflects' reality means that it 'represents', 'corresponds to', or 'truly characterizes' reality.¹⁵ According to Skillen, only the latter sense is of 'epistemological interest'.

I do not deny that there are these two senses of 'reflection'.¹⁶ Indeed, I make a similar distinction myself, by differentiating the 'real' (causal) and 'apparent' (represented) objects of a belief. However, I do question the view that epistemology should be concerned only with the latter and take no interest in the causes of ideas. This is the traditional view. As Skillen's discussion illustrates, it leads to an approach which begins and ends with the insistence that false and illusory ideas – such as dreams or the reactions to brain tumours – are *merely* false.

This approach reached its apogee with the philosophy of the enlightenment, which sought to refute and reject religious and other pre-modern views of the world and establish an outlook based on science and reason in their place. This enlightenment

¹⁴ Moreover, such irritability is not likely to be caused 'only' by the tumour. The fact that I respond with these particular responses to particular individuals, has psychological causes as well. Psychology may thus contribute to our understanding of such symptoms; and psychotherapy may help a person cope with their response to a tumour (although, of course, a brain tumour itself cannot be treated psychologically). Similarly, *one* of the causes of an earthquake dream may be an upset stomach, but its content cannot be explained in those terms alone. See Freud's discussion of 'The Somatic Sources of Dreams', in *Interpretation of Dreams*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1954, ch. 5(c) (Standard Edition, vols 4-5).

¹⁵ Skillen does not spell this point out very fully; I am grateful to Danny Goldstick for these formulations.

¹⁶ I do, however, reject the view that there is any absolute or metaphysical distinction between them. A realist account of knowledge involves the view that our beliefs and their objects must be causally connected. These two senses of 'reflection' are thus not entirely distinct. The causal sense is the more general one; 'reflection' in the sense of 'representation' is a particular form, a sub-species, of it. See 'Knowledge as a Social Phenomenon'.

approach is not so much mistaken as limited. During the last 200 years a quite new way of looking at beliefs and ideas has emerged. Modern thought in many different areas no longer confines itself to passing judgement on the truth or falsehood of the beliefs and ideas it studies. It looks at them naturalistically, as 'phenomena',¹⁷ in social and psychological terms. In doing so it has shown that there is a great deal more to be learned from false ideas than the traditional epistemological account allows.

This new approach to false ideas is evident in virtually every branch of thought: in the study of dreams and madness in psychology, and of magical and 'primitive' beliefs and practices in anthropology and history; in the treatment of earlier and now discredited theories in the history and philosophy of science; in the approach to popular and 'low' culture in literary and cultural studies; in the discussion of ideologies in social and political thought, etc. In all these cases, the aim of study is no longer simply to judge these ideas mistaken or false (though they all are so) by the canons of traditional epistemology. They are now increasingly studied as phenomena significant in their own right for the light they can shed on the conditions which produced them and on current modes of thought.

The emergence of this social and historical approach to ideas, it seems to me, is among the most significant intellectual developments since the enlightenment. Often it is mistaken for a form of relativism or subjectivism; but it cannot adequately be comprehended in those terms. None of the great contributors to this new approach – neither Hegel, Marx, Freud nor the founders of modern social thought – can satisfactorily be characterized in those terms.¹⁸ My aim, in putting forward the view that all ideas reflect reality and contain some measure of truth, is to explain and spell out the fundamental philosophical presuppositions of the approach that these thinkers share and to show how it can be interpreted in realist terms.

This view can, I believe, be defended as a *philosophical* thesis of quite general application, as a 'doctrine', as a 'law', as Skillen puts it. My reasons here are partly philosophical. There are good grounds for questioning the opposite view, the 'doctrine' enunciated by Skillen, that 'not all causes of ideas are objects of ideas'. According to this, beliefs sometimes reflect their objects and sometimes do not – the connection between ideas and their objects is purely contingent. This is familiar enough as a philosophical doctrine: it is the view involved in traditional reflectionist realism (e.g. Descartes, Locke), and it is a form of epistemological dualism.¹⁹ Briefly, my objections to it are as follows. 1) By creating a logical and metaphysical gulf between our beliefs and their supposed objects, such dualism cannot give a satisfactory account of objective knowledge, and thus creates insoluble problems in epistemology (as Berkeley argues against Locke); and 2) by separating mind (beliefs, ideas) from matter, dualism involves an inherently implausible and ultimately unworkable account of mind. The view that

¹⁷ Cf G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Clarendon, Oxford, 1977, 'Introduction'.

¹⁸ With the possible exception of Nietzsche, though even his attitude to relativism is ambiguous.

¹⁹ And therefore incompatible with Skillen's professed materialism.

there is a necessary connection between idea and object, between consciousness and its (material) object, I argue, is a necessary part of a consistent realism and materialism.²⁰

Moreover, if this view is treated as a philosophical principle, as a 'law', then it provides the basis for a methodological principle which can be brought a priori to the study of knowledge. According to this principle, the study of ideas and beliefs should not be limited to judging the truth or falsehood of their explicit contents, as epistemology has traditionally held. Ideas and beliefs should be regarded as phenomena and studied for the light they can shed on the objects or conditions which give rise to them. As I have just explained, I believe that this, or something like it, is a principle of fundamental importance in modern thought.

According to Skillen, however, this whole account is a purely 'verbal' one. 'Suppose Sayers' thesis were ... accepted ... How would this ... undermine traditional realism? It seems to me it would leave it virtually unshaken ... We would still have to say that phlogiston theory is ... false in respect of its 'manifest' or 'intended' content.' This is quite correct and as it should be for a philosophical theory. I am not trying to challenge the view that phlogiston theory gives a mistaken account combustion. That can be done only by scientific investigation in the field of chemistry. Whereas I am putting forward a philosophical theory, the aim of which is to show that when a discredited theory, or a dream, or other false belief or idea is judged to be, indeed, false, an important part of the work of understanding still remains to be done. For we can go on to study these beliefs and ideas as social phenomena. We can investigate why they are believed or experienced, and what this reveals about the nature of the reality from which they arise.

Engels and Dialectic

I have tried to deal with Skillen's main philosophical criticisms. Apart from these, however, Skillen goes out of his way to attack dialectic, though I do not once mention that notion in either of the articles to which he refers. Rashly, however, I do quote Engels. This provokes a series of sneering asides from Skillen. To these purely *ad hominem* remarks, I can only reply *ab homine* that I personally find Engels often a clear and interesting writer on the issues I am discussing and I expect that others, who can avoid the prejudice that Skillen displays, may find him so too.

It is not only Engels who has been branded a 'Stalinist' and removed from the curriculum 'from Berlin to Vladivostock'; the same applies to Marx and virtually every other socialist thinker. That is understandable given what was done there in their names. Nevertheless it is unfortunate and unjustifiable; and will, I have no doubt, be seen as such and corrected in time if those societies succeed in evolving in a rational and democratic direction. Marxism and socialism are, and will remain, hugely influential strands of modern thought: they cannot simply be denied or suppressed.

The view that socialism is refuted and dead is now the received orthodoxy here too – and not only on the right but among 'postmodernist' and other sections of the left as well. Cheap jibes at Engels and dialectic come easy in this climate, but it is hard to see how they will help the Marxist tradition to 'grow'. The danger is rather that they will

²⁰ *Reality and Reason*, chs 1-3, 11.

unwittingly contribute to pressure for socialism to be `removed from the curriculum' here too. That would not be in any way understandable, but a form of repression pure and simple.