CHAPTER 1

TRUTH; WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

1. THE NOTION OF TRUTH

Truth is a central notion in philosophy. Perhaps that is as close to a *communis opinio* as we can get on the issue. Despite its centrality, or perhaps because of it, the notion of truth has not often been systematically surveyed. Despite its centrality, or perhaps because of it, the notion of truth is not a perspicuous one at all. Richard L. Kirkham, who had the courage to scrutinize theories of truth, complains that the notion suffers from a ‘four-dimensional confusion.’ He argues that philosophers are *vague* in describing truth, particularly when it comes to the question of what truth is. They are prone to confuse the question of what truth is with other questions, for instance how to find a criterion of truth, resulting in the second confusion of *ambiguity*. Conversely, the third confusion, philosophers do not always acknowledge that different descriptions in fact serve the same purpose. And the fourth confusion consists in thinking that one theory can satisfy different projects of truth without properly distinguishing them. As anyone dealing with the issue can confirm, it is difficult to get a grip on the problem of truth.

In order to resolve the confusions, Kirkham’s strategy is to reconstruct positions by gathering ‘clues’ as to what exactly an author on truth wants to say and do. Yet, as their autoperception is blurred because of the four-dimensional confusion, Kirkham is sceptical about trusting what writers on truth say about their own theories. He regards their comparisons with other theories as more valuable. But the best clues for Kirkham are the author’s criticisms of other theories. In the alleged differences with competing theories the real issues come to the fore most clearly. Disentangling the confusions is the diagnosing task Kirkham sets himself. Constructively he aims to fit the different clues in the larger puzzle of the problem of truth. Central to this task is the proposal to distinguish between different projects of truth: metaphysical, ‘speech-act,’ and justification projects, all three with subsequent sub-branches. By making these distinctions, Kirkham is able to distinguish between different uses of the words ‘true’ and ‘truth’ and to make a clearer evaluation of positions and theories possible. In this way, indeed, much of the confusion can be cleared up. In particular, the difference between theories of justification and metaphysical accounts of truth is clarified. The metaphysical question of *what truth is*, is of course quite different from the justificatory issue of determining *what is true*. By employing this distinction, we can easily resolve the alleged discrepancy between the correspondence theory of truth and the coherence
theory of truth. The first one serves the metaphysical project of saying what truth is, whereas the second yields a method to decide how specific truth-claims can be validated. The first is a theory of meaning, the second a theory of justification. Kirkham’s distinction also makes clear that metaphysical and ‘speech-act’ theories need not necessarily conflict because they are dealing with different aspects of the notion of truth. The answer to what truth is need not conflict with claims about what the truth-predicate does. The ‘speech-act’ idea that the truth-predicate indicates approval, for instance, need not at all conflict with the metaphysical idea that truth means correspondence with reality. In fact, specifying what truth is, may explain how the truth-predicate can do what it does. After all, we might approve of a truth claim because of its correspondence with reality.

Despite these advantages, I think, Kirkham’s analysis leaves one of the most serious problems untouched. There is a fifth source of confusion that blurs a clear view of the different projects. The issue concerns a deep confusion in understanding the metaphysics of truth. On the one hand, a metaphysical theory of truth answers the question of what truth is. Such a metaphysical theory of truth however is often confused with the alleged requirement of quite a different kind of theory: a theory of metaphysical truth. Associating the notions of truth and metaphysics in any way is asking for confusion, partly because both notions are often defined and understood in terms of each other. Regarding truth, moreover, we also face a self-referential complication: the real truth of the matter might be that there is no truth at all. As it only complicates a clear view, I shall avoid as much as possible the combination of ‘metaphysic’ and ‘truth,’ and discuss the issue in different terms. In fact, three ‘levels’ of truth should be distinguished. Firstly, when asking what truth is, the first thing to investigate is the truth-predicate. If we can cover this predicate extensionally, we have grasped the notion of truth as it functions within language. I shall refer to this level of truth as the extensional truth. Secondly, it is often thought that in order to understand the nature of truth we need more than extensional truth. In particular some kind of reference to reality itself is required. Only then the meaning of the truth-predicate is understood; — I shall refer to this level of truth as semantical truth. Thirdly, this reference to reality itself invites, what I shall call, factual truth. The idea is that the truth-predicate must be validated somehow (‘made true’) by how it really is, and this requires a substantial theory of factual truth. Below, I shall discuss the three levels of extensional, factual and semantical truth more extensively. For now, suffice it to say that confusing these three levels has severe consequences for understanding truth and indeed gives rise to the problem of truth as it faces us in the postmodern challenge. When this confusion is resolved, I will argue, truth will turn out not to be problematical at all.

For a good understanding, it is important to see how this confusion could come about. In the next chapter, I shall investigate the history of this fifth confusion. For now, we need to get a clearer view on what it involves and how it is related to different theories of truth.