

# TRUTH & RELATIVITY: AN EXCHANGE

## Sean Sayers' Relativism

*Tony Skillen*

For some years Sean Sayers has been urging, against empiricism and analytical philosophy, the virtues of dialectical logic. Such logic, he believes, is essential to a proper understanding. I take issue with this view at the level of 'logic and language'. It seems to me that, far from an acceptance of dialectical logic being essential to a broadly 'dialectical' or systemic-interactionist view of things, the association of an emphasis on 'whole systems' with dialectical logic of the sort Sayers advocates weakens its validity and plausibility. So, having long benefited from Sayers urging that things be examined 'dialectically', but having failed to be persuaded of the need for the sort of logical revisions he advocates, I offer the following criticisms.

To put my own view in advance: it seems to me that I can agree with almost all Sayers' substantive claims about, for example, the social development of science, but I do not see how this agreement in any way requires me to embrace what seem to me to be obscuring conceptions of knowledge, truth and logic. It seems to me, on the contrary, that an interactional and systemic view of anything requires a 'moment' of rigorous analysis as well as a synthetic perspective. What is wrong with the crude either-or is not logical but substantial conventionalism, and the struggle in thought, therefore, is to arrive at views that are, while respectful of tensions and complexities, consistent.

In 'F. H. Bradley and the concept of Relative Truth',<sup>1</sup> Sayers asserts his 'materialism', his 'realism' and 'the importance of avoiding scepticism and relativism', urging Bradley and Engels' views as an alternative to these, as well as to the errors of traditional realism. Although Sayers recurrently attacks 'absolute' conceptions of 'truth' he appeals throughout to an absolute conception of 'reality'. I do not see what space there can be for this wedge. Surely assertions *about* 'reality' just are claims purporting *to* 'truth'. 'Really and truly' is a repetition. We understand what it is for it to be true that snow is white just as we understand what it is for snow to be (really) white. As Quine says (and I quote him, not to settle this issue, but as a reminder that to make it an issue requires defence), 'there is surely no disputing that "snow is white" is true if and only if snow is white'.<sup>2</sup>

Sayers seems to think that an absolute *conception* of truth entails an 'absolute' view of our claim at any given time to truth, to a sort of omniscience or Cartesian infallibility. But the idea that we are biologically and historically

conditioned in our grasp of the world does not support any alterations in the concept of truth. Indeed, I would argue, it presupposes, in asserting that we often cannot know that we have the final truth, precisely the 'absolute' conception Sayers claims to reject.

Sayers says that views that represent a given stage in the growth of knowledge (we could ask: which views? given that at any stage there is disagreement) are 'necessary', 'justified', 'true', and 'correct' 'relative to experience and to thought as it has developed at that stage'.<sup>3</sup> It seems to me to be almost tautological to say that, assuming good reasoning, a view is justified relative to its supporting thought and experience. But it seems to me a confusing use of language to describe views as 'true' in virtue of their conformity with such thought and experience (as 'relative to the Greeks' beliefs, etc. it was true that Hermes was expressing his anger'). Is this just a way of saying that this was a reasonable thing to think then? But justified belief need not be true belief. And anyway, is a belief 'justified' 'absolutely' or 'relatively'? In other words, what, in Sayers' view, is the status of a claim that some view or theory was justified in terms of the evidence (actually) available at the time? Why, given that there appears to be no particular problem with saying of some theory that, although there were good grounds for holding it, it was false, does Sayers feel a pressure to equate warranted belief with truth, albeit 'relative truth'?

Sayers also says, differently, that we should not describe as false (absolutely) views that 'played an essential part in the growth of knowledge'<sup>4</sup> and he makes much of science as developing (in 'leaps' and 'great strides') over time as an argument against absolute truthists. But there is no mystery in falsehoods playing great parts. Plato's cosmology, for example, with its monotheism, theory of forms, and ideological-expressive conception of material things, proved more fertile in many ways than the diligent observationalism of people like Democritus. Belief in a false idea can be the reason for the adopting of any number of true ideas.

Similarly, when Sayers approvingly quotes Bradley (he could have invoked Engels) to the effect that ideas are 'really' justified if they 'work', 'relative to our needs',<sup>5</sup> it is unclear that this advances beyond 'mere' relativism. A 'working hypothesis' is not thereby established as true even 'for its time'. Scientists commonly speak of their models

either as 'best guesses' or as 'useful fictions', hence showing a recognition of the distinction between predictive-practical success and truth that Sayers appears to deny. Not that the issue of whether a theory 'works pragmatically' is not itself one of absolute truth. Without a (traditional) realist view, how 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 – 'what worked for them no longer works for us'?

### The attack on partial truths

Sayers attacks Ewing's view that the 'partial truths' of Bradley ought to be resolved into truths *and* falsehoods.<sup>6</sup> He claims that Ewing's view would entail that science is an unsystematic piling up of facts, 'items of data'. I find no support for this inference. Indeed Sayers' own remarks about phlogiston theory bear Ewing out. Phlogiston theory, Sayers says, correctly recognised that combustion is to be understood, not alchemically or supernaturally, but chemically, and genuine discoveries assuming phlogiston theory were made. But its postulate of the extra element is false: 'Of course, as we now know that ('relative to our current views'? T. S.) there is not and never has been such a thing as phlogiston'.<sup>7</sup> So, we could agree with Sayers that phlogiston theory was not 'pure error and illusion'. As Ewing would have it: there were some ideas that the phlogiston people had right. There is no tendency here to say that what they had right were merely 'items of data'. Scientific criticism often needs to 'deconstruct', vertically as well as horizontally, a system of ideas, and it may hang on to ideas at very different theoretical levels (e.g. 'combustion can be understood chemically'). 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 – he does to Bradley precisely what he says is 'childish' when done to others. Sayers absolutely agrees with Bradley, for example, in the view that all ideas 'in a sense' are true, 'contain some measure of truth'<sup>8</sup> about the world.

Yet it is not clear that the place this proposition has in Bradley's Absolute Idealist System (where reality is 'one', 'essentially experience' and 'owns a balance of pleasure') is anything like the place it has in Sayers' more Lockean-reflectionist philosophy. Sayers says, for example, that *all* ideas 'reflect reality', that there are no 'absolute errors'.<sup>9</sup> But what is it for an idea to 'reflect reality'? The notion of reflection has dazzled philosophers since Plato. I find it difficult to discover in Sayers' thought support for his claim, beyond the point, for example, that even dreams, a putative paradigm of 'mere error', 'reflect' the 'realities' of the subject's psychic economy. But there is surely a big difference between the idea that dreams *about* something are revealing about that thing (think of Joseph's interpretation of Pharaoh's Dreams) and the idea that your dreams about, say, an earthquake, 'tell us' about your father or what you had for dinner – 'reflecting' that 'reality'. That minimal causal sense of 'reflection' is surely miles away either from Bradley's, or from great epistemological interest. Deter-

minism is not equivalent to Relative Realism. However much it may be true that one's stomach or one's psyche, or one's material situation is disturbed, it remains 'absolutely false' that, as one's dream had it, one is trapped in an earthquake. As we shall see, Sayers contests this criticism, so I shall discuss his argument below.

Recirculating the currency of Dialectical Materialism, Sayers rubbishes the 'laws of logic' such as the law of the excluded middle. It is hard for me to see how discussion or even thought can carry on without this minimal, formal given: either p or not-p. Let us look at one of Sayers' examples of this benighted law with its 'rigid either/or' in operation. According to the Law, according to Sayers 'Either we must regard current science as the pure light of truth, which emerges out of the darkness of pure error, or we must look upon it ... as sheer fallacy and illusion.'<sup>10</sup> This reminds me of the evangelists who used to threaten with 'Either Jesus was the wickedest liar in history or the most extreme lunatic or he was indeed the Christ.' The Law of the Excluded Middle has no tendency to imply that the hyperbolic options Sayers sets up are exhaustive, any more than it tells us that if we are not at the North Pole we must be at the South Pole. Quite simply, any absolute realist would think that current science includes many truths, some falsehoods, many approximations and huge gaps. Sayers, it seems to me, erects an unnecessary and obfuscating, and unsupportive scaffold to affirm the realism and materialism he rightly espouses. No realist need be embarrassed to accept that, while we have 'some grasp of the truth, some grasp of the natural world',<sup>11</sup> our knowledge is limited and subject to distortion.

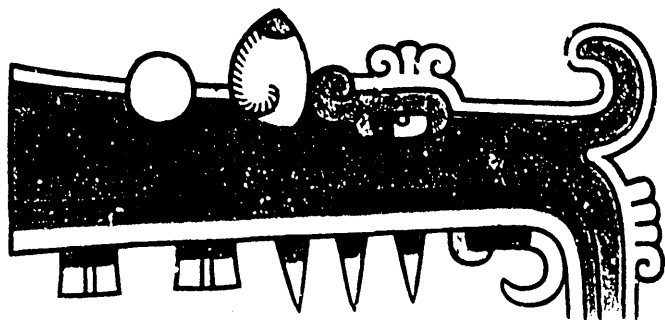
The criticisms above are not peculiar to me. They emerged in comments on Sayers' book *Reality and Reason* (Blackwell, 1985). In his *Radical Philosophy* response to these criticisms,<sup>12</sup> Sayers defends the position that, since ideas are caused by reality (which follows from determinism), they must 'reflect' reality in an epistemologically relevant sense. (Given that every aspect of an idea will, on a determinist view, have a cause, this would seem to mean that any idea will be 'true' of all its causes. As Sayers urges, a realist view of knowledge will tend to be a causal one: for there to be knowledge, what is known must be causally connected with the 'idea'. This seems to me essential, for example, for solving Gettier's famous problem of a well-grounded belief turning out to be true as a result of circumstances which played no part in the belief's formation. But, whereas it seems to me that the main problem *then* is to analyse the specificity of this relation, Sayers leaves it unspecified and, moreover, takes the widely-held idea that 'ideas' are 'caused' by material processes to support the thesis that all ideas contain a 'measure of truth' or have 'relative truth'. As he says: 'This element of truth (in "illusory ideas") becomes evident when the real object of these ideas is revealed: and this is done by understanding their genesis, by discovering the circumstance that gives rise to them.'<sup>13</sup> Note again the 'absolute realist' standpoint from which this relative element is to be discovered: Sayers stands outside the socio-historical process to know its causal story – a characteristic of all 'sociology of knowledge'.

## 'Causes' and 'objects' of ideas

Responding to other critics, Sayers makes suggestive use of Marx's (Feuerbachian) view of religion as a projection of human ideals and the perceived shortfall in actual conditions onto the heavens: 'Religious suffering is at one and the same time the expression of real suffering.' Here the important idea that Sayers endorses is that religious belief is a (distorted) form of awareness of the genuine privations from which it arises: its cause is its (unrecognised) object. Hence religious belief is true of its 'real object'. (We could compare other Marxian passages where ideology is presented as a distorted mode of awareness of class relations, contrasting with other passages where ideology is presented as a by-product of conditions knowable only through science.) Sayers also makes use of the Freudian notion of manifest and latent content, where the dream is not just traced to its underlying cause but is seen as being *about* that and, properly interpreted, as a true, though disguised, picture of that (the hatred of father, the wish for a penis, etc.). These cases are analogous to Sayers' example of the mirage where the subject is seeing the sky refracted through hot air.

This is a challenging thesis. But erected into a philosophical doctrine it seems in danger of sliding into a largely verbal insistence: whatever we take to be the cause of an idea we will call the real 'object' and 'truth' of that idea. How would that re-description advance understanding? On the face of it, what Sayers is advocating is that, where someone believes falsely that something is the case, we ought to say that the 'truth' in their belief is whatever actually gave rise to it. What Sayers' thesis minimally needs is the substantive idea, found in Marx and Freud, of 'unconscious awareness', of false ideas as needing interpretation as distorted modes of grasping a felt reality. To dredge up G. E. M. Anscombe's phrase in *Intention*, the false believer grasps reality all right, but not 'under the right description'. (Compare religious claims that in seeking this we are really seeking that (God)).<sup>14</sup>

However, 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 in my brain, it seems to me a big stretch to say that my delusive ideas about my fellows are thereby shown to have a measure of truth about, not them, but my brain. I can imagine, perhaps, discoveries pushing me to accept the latter view, but until then I prefer to distinguish cases where cause and object (more or less) coincide and cases where they don't – as in the dreams



discussed above. This could be expressed as the 'doctrine' that not all causes of ideas are objects of ideas.

But suppose Sayers' thesis were one that was accepted: yes, religious belief is belief 'about' earthly conditions, phlogiston theory is 'about' the experimental and socio-economic realities that produced it, etc. How would this (to my mind implausible eventuality) undermine traditional realism? It seems to me that it would leave it virtually unshaken. We would, at the end of the day, be left talking in terms of absolute truth and falsehood, but now with a changed vocabulary.

For we would still have to say that, although phlogiston theory is 'true of' its socio-economic as well as its chemical determinants, it is (largely) false in respect of its 'manifest' or 'intended' content. In the linguistic shake-up consequent on acceptance of Sayers' Law, all that would have been achieved is a re-wording that in effect preserves the old, and in my view ineradicable, concept of truth intact. For we do not need Sayers' Law in the historical investigation of scientific and other views in respect of a critical or genetic account of them: what did these people think? What was correct and incorrect in their views? What shaped their views? What can we learn from them? No decent history of ideas regards the past as a pit of 'mere error'. But any history of ideas is going, even if it purports to relativism, to employ a 'traditional' concept of truth. How this concept makes the 'process of growth and development' in knowledge 'impossible to understand' when the very notion of 'growth and development' presupposes such a concept, is hard to understand.

Sayers speaks of Engels as 'now unfashionable'. As an ironic comment on his removal from the compulsory Stalinist curriculum from Berlin to Vladivostok this passes. What I have tried to do is to indicate that Sayers' important insistence over the years on the systemically complex nature of reality and our practical and theoretical grasp of it does not require the conjuring tricks inherent in 'dialectical logic'. The dialectical thought of the Marxist tradition, it seems to me, needs to be freed from this husk so that it can grow.

### Notes

- 1 *Radical Philosophy* 59 (Autumn 1991), pp. 15-20.
- 2 *The Pursuit of Truth*, 1990.
- 3 *Radical Philosophy* 59, pp. 16-18.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 17, where 'contain some measure of truth' is identified with 'are anchored in reality in some way'.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 Seal Sayers, 'Knowledge as a Social Phenomenon', *Radical Philosophy* 52 (Summer 1989), pp. 34-37.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- 14 It is important to these psycho-analytic and Feuerbachian accounts that the subject is, acutely but unconsciously, aware of the unbearable or inadmissible truth. This greatly limits the generalisability of this model.

# Once more on Relative Truth: A Reply to Skillen

*Sean Sayers*

In the articles that Skillen criticises,<sup>1</sup> 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.

This is remarkable. These problems have been central to discussion in epistemology for the past thirty 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 mention these arguments, nor 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 recognises 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 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 makes 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.' This will not do. The notion of an 'approximation' implies the relative concept of truth; an absolute realist like Skillen cannot use it 'consistently', 'rigorously' and 'without obfuscation'.<sup>2</sup> An approximation is not absolutely true (though something close to it is); according to the absolute conception it must therefore be absolutely false.<sup>3</sup> This is not like saying 'if we are not at the North Pole we must be at the South Pole'. The 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.

In my article on Bradley (p. 17), I criticise Ewing's argument that 'a judgement can only be partially true or partially false in the sense that it is analysable 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 criticising, both in my discussion of Bradley, and of the phlogiston theory.

Skillen is right to criticise 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 recognised 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.

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 judgement which can be made only on the basis of, and relative to, 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.<sup>4</sup>

### 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.<sup>5</sup> 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 criticised by Skillen, I maintain that this is the sort 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.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

### 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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,<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup>

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

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 in 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.<sup>14</sup>

## 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 characterises' reality.<sup>15</sup> According to Skillen, only the latter sense is of 'epistemological interest'.

I do not deny that there are these two senses of 'reflection'.<sup>16</sup> 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.

The 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 approach is not so much mistaken as

limited. During the last two hundred 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',<sup>17</sup> 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 worthless or false (though they are all 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 pioneers of this new approach – neither Hegel, Marx, Freud nor the founders of modern social thought – can satisfactorily be characterised in those terms.<sup>18</sup> 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 causes and sometimes do not – the connection between the content of our ideas and their causes 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.<sup>19</sup> Briefly, the problems with 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 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.<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, if this view is treated as a philosophical principle, as a 'law', then it provides the basis for a meth-

odological 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 of 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 expected, 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. In particular, my mention of Engels provokes a series of *ad hominem* asides from Skillen. To these I can only reply *ab homine* that I personally find Engels a clear and interesting writer on the issues I am discussing and I expect that others may find him so too.

It is not only Engels who has been branded a 'Stalinist' and removed from the curriculum 'from Berlin to Vladivostok'; 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 – 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 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.

### Notes

- 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. 34-37. For a more extended treatment of these issues, see *Reality and Reason. Dialectic and the Theory of Knowledge*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1985.
- 2 It would 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.
- 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 recognise.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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'.
- 17 In 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.
- 20 *Reality and Reason*, chs. 1-3, 11.