

Meaning and Truth

a story by

Pier Celeste Marchetti

(English translation by Wendy Piemonte)

In 1930, Bertrand Russell, a Welsh philosopher, already well-known beyond the shores of Great Britain, having been born in 1872 could only be 58 years old. For the sake of being precise and out of respect for an illustrious personality in the field of mathematical logic.

At that time he had already published some important works which had immediately made history in philosophy. In particular, *The Principles of Mathematics* and *Our Knowledge of the External World as a Field for Scientific Method in Philosophy*.

But he was not satisfied. He could not find the right answers to the many questions that arose as he continued to probe into human thought. He could no longer live with this doubt.

A man of significant learning, he thought the best place to find clear and final answers could only be where culture had found fertile ground for Humanism first, and then the Renaissance. So he dashed on the first train leaving from London, and after crossing the Channel, by ferry of course since there was no Eurotunnel at the time, directed himself to the homeland of modern culture, Tuscany, and more precisely to Bolgheri where the cypress trees “run stately and tall from San Guido in a double row”, as he had read in a newspaper about an Italian poet by the name of Giosuè Carducci, awarded the Nobel prize in 1906.

Here, walking under the shade of the cypress trees since it was a sunny afternoon, he saw two people coming from the town cemetery in the opposite direction. On the left, a somewhat elderly and well-dressed, elegant gentleman with a confident stride and whose tie and jacket were in perfect order despite the heat. On the right instead, with a slightly uncertain step and walking with some difficulty, with the aid of a cane that had something old about it, an elderly woman who was definitely all hunched up because of her age and perhaps even because of

experience, whose hair was completely gray and face lined with deep wrinkles.

As the two approached, Bertrand Russell stopped them.

“Forgive me if I inconvenience you, but in my constant exploring of human beings in pursuit of knowledge, I cannot help but ask: who are you, why do you look different, why are you walking on opposite sides of the road, and where are you going?”

The man, not very gallant, was the first to speak.

“I am Mr. Meaning, born from the human mind already when the first being from which we all descend had realized that he had been seriously cheated by accepting to live with a woman and this is why I am careful not to go over to the other side of the road. And I am still good-looking, because I am able to give the right meaning to everything, including time. For example, see that ox which has a soothing sense about it? What is its meaning? I know, because I am its meaning. You may think that the meaning of an ox lies in its drawing a plough. Well, you’re mistaken. This is why it exists, but not its meaning. In order to find the meaning, we should follow its example: bend ourselves over to pull together all the necessary strength to draw the plough. Only that our effort is a mental one. Here, it is a matter of considering the term *ox* in its logical-mathematical implications. So it is our mind that we must use, not our muscles. But in order to use the mind properly, one should first understand the mind, that is, know what it means, which is also what I mean because of my name. What do you know about the mind?”

Bertrand Russell was immediately at a loss, even though back in 1921 he had published the essay *The Analysis of Mind*, where he had even examined the relationship between *words and meaning* in a chapter. The problem is that when Meaning posed the question, he realized that he had analyzed the mind but had not determined its meaning as Mr. Meaning, who was undoubtedly the supreme authority on this matter, had done. However, always keen to see his research through to the end, our philosopher decided to further analyze the problem.

“Dear Mr. Meaning, yours is definitely a profound observation, but in my modest opinion it does not examine this problem thoroughly. In fact, your reasoning is based on your examination of elements outside yourself, such as the ox and the mind. But since you are called Meaning, can you explain what your meaning is?”

Somewhat taken aback and realizing that he was not dealing with a fledgling, Meaning found himself completely over his head: “The problem is that I cannot know what my meaning

is. Actually, I must admit, taking back what I said just a moment ago, that no meaning can be defined with certainty. Take that gray donkey nibbling away at the thistle for example. The meaning of his name should be “a four-legged animal of the order of the Perissodactyla, sometimes used for towing (a pack animal), sometimes used for turning a wheel (see what Candlewick ended up doing in the adventures of Pinocchio), once used to make the excellent mortadella from Bologna”. With this definition there is already a risk of missing the meaning. But if I was to call you a donkey, then the meaning would no longer be the same because the definition would be “a rather stupid man”. And if we consider the meaning of “burro” (butter), we discover that in Italian it means a product made by churning milk, while in Spanish, lo and behold, it means “donkey”. Well, we have a veritable babel of meanings. You asked me where I am going. Here comes the stumbling block. How can I know where the mechanics of the mind, which is where I reside, are taking me if there is more than one meaning to each meaning?”

At this point the old lady who had waited patiently for her turn, began to speak.

“I am Truth. I have been in this world ever since I was revealed. Do not ask me when, because there is more than one truth about the exact date. Some religions have given official dates, but this is not so simple, because at the end, every human being has his own truth. Other dates are always being moved so to speak, because of paleo-anthropological findings, that establish the date of my birth, which is when human thought was born, ever further back in time.

And then my dear sir, you are telling me that True plus True makes True. For example, if all men are intelligent and Socrates was a man, then is it really true, and please excuse the pun here, that Socrates was intelligent? Because what we need to do first is to see if it is true that all men are intelligent. If you take a look around, this doubt really does come to mind and, may I say with a sense of bitter disappointment, this is really depressing for someone called Truth. And are we really sure that Socrates was a man? The fact that he was a philosopher and that he died a man, drinking without a blink of the eye the hemlock that a jury had sentenced him to take, does not make us absolutely certain.

And what about women, gays and trans-genders then? Could it be that those who belong to these categories are not included in the group of intelligent people?

Backed by your studies, you will answer that when searching for the truth one cannot however ignore that paradoxes exist. So where does this lead us? Let’s take your barber paradox

for example, which is something of an antinomy because it is a contradiction and not a non-contradictory logical conclusion. Has there been a short-circuit in your brain circuits? What can you base the antinomy on if the premise is not always true? In fact, since the men who go to this barber could even shave themselves on their own if they wanted to, everybody is also his own barber. So in your hypothetical town, there cannot be just one barber, but everybody can shave everybody else. So, the barber can shave the men who don't shave, he can even shave himself, but he can even be shaven by those men who, because they shave themselves, know how to shave and therefore can shave the barber. So where do we put the bald and hairless people, also in view of the fact that hairless means without hairs, and therefore even without the hairs that are the hairs on our head, isn't that true Mr. Meaning? And what about bald people with hairs and hairy people without hair?

So, does the truth lie in the meaning or the meaning in the truth? Or, is it like the two of us on this path, each on his own and walking separately, inevitably not grasping the meaning of truth or the truth of meaning?"

"Your disquisitions Mrs. Truth" said Mr. Meaning "confirm my firm belief that the meaning of truth is also to be considered ambiguous. Is there, given your questions, one only meaning of truth or are there several truths instead, each with its own meaning, which could also be ambiguous in turn?"

"I think, or rather I'm certain that I'm not ambiguous at all because I always tell the truth, otherwise I would be called Falsehood. And, before you make any immediate objections, gentlemen, I will tell you that I am using the conjunctive mode, instead of the indicative which expresses certainty, only because of *consecutio temporum*.

As for my appearance, Mr. Russell, I may very well appear very ugly to you, but I assure you that this is the truth, because the truth reveals what we really are and so we are all ugly. Beauty is only a mask that was created to hide the truth and even to misrepresent it. You must have read *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*! Well, it was actually a metaphor. Oscar Wilde is really talking about me. But am I Dorian Gray or am I his portrait? Because the problem is that if I am Dorian Gray, then I should always be young, but you can see that I am old. So, I should be the portrait. But if I am the portrait of myself, at the end, when Dorian Gray tears me, he should age until he dies, whereas I should get younger. Instead, I am always old, as you see me here, and am

always getting older. Because the truth is that Dorian Gray thinks he is always young and beautiful, having practically made his portrait age rather than himself, however his youth is only a lie masking the old age of his soul.

I should be the only one to say what is certain, and therefore true, because I am the Truth and as such I can only tell the truth. This is also demonstrated in the antinomy of Epimenides of Knossos (VI BC), later called the liar paradox as you, being a philosopher, very well know. Elaborating on this, if I say *I am a liar* and I am a liar, then I am telling the truth so I am not a liar, and if I say *I am a liar and I am not a liar* then I am telling a lie, so in saying that I am a liar I am always telling the truth. This is the truth.

However, the fact that others later tried to demonstrate and explain what could not be demonstrated in logical terms, is of little account, because the unanswered question here is: where is the truth? In Dorian Gray or in his portrait?

“Answering your doubts, my dear lady” observed Meaning in a slightly controversial tone “would necessitate knowing what the exact, univocal meanings of *Dorian Gray* and of *portrait* are, but even before this the meaning of your name, *truth*. But can there be any univocal meanings? I really don’t think so. Both Dorian Gray and his portrait cannot avoid changing, and consequently change their own meaning. Given your name, you must admit that this is the absolute truth”.

“It’s true, I admit, I am changing” Truth answered “as the history of humanity shows. However, it is not certain if I am ageing, because with the change, which is equal to the tearing of my portrait, I could also be getting younger. I am changing, not only according to religious belief, but for each religious belief, with the passing of the centuries. In fact, according to Catholicism up to a certain point the truth was the Ptolemaic concept of the universe. The earth was the center of the system and everything revolved around it. Galileo Galilei, who paid the consequences for supporting the contrary, knows something about this. But then the Catholic Church recognized that Galileo was right. And what to say about those poor wretches who die condemned to the eternal punishment of hell for eating meat on Friday without any repent? My propensity to change will allow the Church to communicate to its God a few decades from now that eating meat on a Friday will no longer be a mortal sin, obliging the Supreme Being to take back into Paradise all those people who had been condemned for eternity.

It should also be pointed out that my changing, that is, my ageing (or my getting younger?), is also taking place in terms of scientific reasoning, as the story of the triangle shows. According to his first four postulates Euclid, in demonstrating his geometric theories, had established that the sum of the internal angles of a triangle was always 180° but not even he was convinced of this. Euclid ignored the fact that Aristotle, before him, had already outlined different geometries. These were first demonstrated by the Arab philosophers and were finally made clear in the XIX century. In fact, the sum is always 180° if the sides of the triangle are straight lines. If the sides are concave however, the sum is greater than 180° and varies according to the curve of the line. If the sides are convex the sum will be less than 180° varying, as always, according to the degree of the curve. We also have a number of variations: a side can be straight, another convex and another concave; or two sides can be straight and one convex or concave; etc. Well the truth is that even I don't know what the truth is. And you, Mr. Russell, are asking me where I am going? Definitely towards a change, but I really don't know where".

Bertrand Russell, although he was a philosopher and mathematician as well, could not make out how the two contenders were unable to reach a joint, logical solution.

Strange as it may seem, the reason why an agreement could not be reached, was very clear to the grey donkey instead. In applying the arithmetic he had learnt at what was once called elementary school and instead of using complex logical-mathematical applications, he put two and two together which always makes four. In so doing he realized that since the paths ran parallel and the two were walking on opposite sides, they could only meet in the infinite, that is, practically never. With the clear conscience of those who, through and thanks to their simplicity of soul and thought, manage to understand how the world really works and how brain circuits actually work, that is, separate from the other and therefore unable to solve any conflict of interest, including those of meaning and truth, "The gray donkey" as Carducci had written "who on a purple thistle/ Was grazing close beside me, seemed no interest to feel/ Never deigned to look when he heard the engine whistle/ But gravely and slowly proceeded with his meal".

There was nothing left for Bertrand Russell to do but to go back home, without finding the answer to his questions since it was clearly impossible to get Meaning and Truth to agree. It is from this experience, whatever the academics may say, that years after in 1956 the *Logic and knowledge: essays 1901-1950* was published, in which he affirmed that "only a large measure of

skepticism can tear away the veils which hide this truth from us”.

But, Puddhing, the irreverent son of Puda, the malicious spelling mistake and bitter enemy of Buddha, in the past had already gifted humanity with one of his many pearls of wisdom based on his many years of experience, which competed superbly with those of Confucius and much later were not to cut a poor figure against those of Orson Wells: experience is a toothbrush and a tube of toothpaste that you happen to have in your hand when you are already completely toothless. This came from somebody who knew what he was talking about, since he had been forced to eat only pudding as a child and for all his life because of the spelling mistake he had inherited from his father, and had not developed any teeth.

That’s how things stand. In fact, humanity was to have waited until the year 2010 for a solution to the problem. It was only then that A. P., a sculptor from Fano who did not use a hammer or chisel but only iron and cement for his sculptures, created a monument to fatigue: two oxen drawing a plough underneath a yoke, led by a farmer who was so bent over he was almost touching the ground. Seeing him, his friend P. C. M. - a pen pusher who was bald, skeptical to the bone, and who during his university studies had analyzed Bertrand Russell in-depth - many years after reading and learning by heart at elementary school two poetic works, *Before San Guido* and *The Ox* by this Giosuè Carducci, under the ever watchful eye of his schoolteacher Tur., who was always ready to use her stick, was struck by the Idea.

The synthesis was right there, under his very eyes. His skepticism had torn away the veils that were hiding the truth. This time, there was only one, clear meaning, and it was exactly that of two oxen drawing the plough and the farmer bent over the handles. But the truth was the obvious fatigue of proceeding underneath the yoke of daily life.