

Some Main Problems of Philosophy

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Foreword

WHEN I URGED PROFESSOR MOORE to publish these lectures which he gave some forty years ago he said to me "But surely they are out of date." Certainly they are out of date. Moore's own work in philosophy over these forty years is by itself enough to render them out of date. Anyone hearing these lectures at the time they were given might have guessed that they would soon be out of date. For in these lectures philosophy is done with a directness and honesty and incisiveness which at once gives hope that we may, working with Moore, soon cut a way out of the jungle into the light. It is the same hope we felt when we read what we still read—Moore's *Principia Ethica* and his *Philosophical Studies*. That hope was justified.

Amongst the problems which agitate philosophers there are two which, I think, strike the non-philosopher as especially remote, as typically frivolous. They are the problem of the external world and the problem of general ideas.

When the philosopher asks "Do we really know what things are good and what are bad?", when he asks "What is goodness?" the plain man sympathizes. When the philosopher asks "Do we really know of the existence of mind?" "How do we know the past?" "What do we mean when we speak of consciousness or of what no longer exists?" the plain man may still manage to sympathize. But when the philosopher asks "Do we really know that there is bread here and now in our mouths?" "What do we mean when we speak of chairs and tables?" then the whole thing is apt to seem ridiculous to the plain man.

And when the philosopher then asks "What is it to mean anything?" "What is it to have a general idea of anything?" "What is it to have a universal before the mind, to notice its presence in something before one?" "What is it for a quality to be present in this and also in that?" then to the plain man it seems that the philosopher is getting himself into a difficulty by asking for the reduction to something more simple of what couldn't be simpler.

Moore manages to present these central, limiting, typical problems in such a way that the reader in spite of himself begins to feel them. And without this feeling of the difficulty

believed most certainly is—there certainly *is* such a thing. And it is not quite easy to see what is the difference between saying that there is such a thing as what is believed and saying that what is believed is a fact.

Now, of course, nobody supposes that even if there *is* such a thing as what is believed in all cases equally, whether the belief is true or false, this does away with the distinction between true and false beliefs. Nobody supposes this, any more than they suppose that even if we have to admit there *are* such things as griffins and centaurs and chimaeras, this fact does away with the distinction between the real and the imaginary. Even if there *is* such a thing as *what* is believed, where a belief is false, it is certain that what is believed is *not* in that case a fact in the same sense, as it would be if the belief were true. But you see there is exactly the same reason for supposing that there *is* such a thing as God's existence, even if those who believe in it believe falsely, as there is for supposing that there is such a thing as a griffin, even if a griffin is purely imaginary. And I think the case of false belief is the clearest one, in which to raise the question whether the reason is a good one or not. I propose, therefore, to ask: Does the mere fact that people believe in God's existence, prove that there is such a thing as God's existence or not? If so, what is the difference between the assertion that there is such a thing as God's existence and the assertion that God's existence is a fact? And if not, how do you answer the argument which seems to prove that what is believed, whether truly or falsely, in any case certainly must *be*?

Chapter 14

Beliefs and Propositions

THE QUESTION which I promised to begin with now is the question what truth *is*, or what is the difference between true beliefs and false ones. And this is a question about which it seems to me to be extremely difficult either to think clearly or to speak clearly—far more difficult than in the case of any

question I have yet discussed. It is, in the first place, extremely difficult to distinguish clearly and to avoid confusing the different views which may be held about it; and, in the second place, even if you do succeed in doing this, it is extremely difficult to *express* the distinctions clearly. I am afraid I shall not have succeeded in doing either—either in avoiding confusion, or in expressing myself clearly. But I must do the best I can.

One fact which is liable to introduce complications into the discussion although, so far as I can see, it is really quite irrelevant, is the fact that in the case of the commonest instances of mistaken belief—those which occur most commonly in ordinary life, and about which there is the least doubt that they *are* false beliefs—there is so often a doubt as to exactly *what* it is that is believed. You might think that we could not choose better instances, in which to investigate the essence of a false belief, than such common instances as the following. I often believe such things as that my scissors are lying on the table, when, in fact, they are not; or that my hat is hanging in the hall, when, in fact, it isn't. False beliefs of this kind do constantly occur in ordinary life; and no one doubts that they *are* false beliefs. But, as we have seen in the earlier part of these lectures, different philosophers take extremely different views as to *what* we are actually believing when we believe such things as this. There is no sort of agreement as to what scissors are, or what a table is, or what is meant by lying on a table. And though, so far as I can see, this question as to what is meant by the apparently simple proposition "My scissors are lying on my table" is not strictly relevant to the question what is the difference between saying that it is true and saying that it is false (indeed, it seems quite plain, that, whatever its meaning may be, the difference between its being true and its being false must be the same): yet this doubt as to its meaning *might* be thought to affect the question as to what is meant by its being true, or would, I think, in any case hinder us from seeing quite as clearly as is desirable exactly what the difference is. I want, therefore, to get an instance of a false belief, in which there shall be as little doubt as possible as to exactly what it is that is believed. And in looking for an instance, which should satisfy *this* requirement, I have only been able to hit upon one, which suffers from the defect that it is a false belief, which you might say is not at all likely to be actually occurring. It is, however, a false belief of a sort

which *does* quite commonly occur. And I must do the best I can with it; as I haven't been able to think of an instance which is really ideal in all respects.

Well, my instance is this. You all of you know quite well the sort of sounds—the actual sense-data which you would be hearing now if a brass-band were playing loud in this room. This kind of fact, the kind of fact which consists in the actual experience of such striking sense-data as the noise of a brass-band playing quite near you, seems to me to be a kind of fact with regard to which there is the least possibility of mistake as to their nature. And also there is no kind of fact of which each of us can be more certain than that we are or are not, at a given moment, experiencing particular sense-data of this violent nature. There is nothing of which I am more certain than that I am *not* at this moment experiencing those extremely striking and unmistakable sense-data, which I can only describe as those which I should be experiencing if a brass-band were playing loudly in this room. And you all of you, I think, know as well as I do what kind of sense-data I mean—what the noise of a brass-band is like—and that *you* are *not* now hearing these sense-data. Well, suppose that somebody somewhere were believing now that some one of us is now hearing the noise of a brass-band. As I say, I suppose it is not at all likely that anybody anywhere is actually making this mistake at the present moment with regard to anyone. But it is a sort of mistake which we certainly do quite often make. We often make mistakes which consist in supposing that some other person is at a given moment experiencing sense-data, which he is *not* in fact experiencing at that moment. Smith, for instance, may believe, on a particular evening, that his friend Jones has gone out to hear the band; and, if Smith is at all imaginative, he may go on to imagine what Jones would be experiencing, upon that hypothesis: he may actually represent to himself and believe that *Jones is hearing the noise of a brass-band*. Smith certainly *might* believe this of Jones; and he might easily be quite mistaken. It might be, for instance, that though Jones had told him that he was going to hear the band that evening, yet Jones had, in fact, been prevented from leaving home at all. Smith would in that case, be believing that Jones was experiencing sense-data, which Jones was *not* in fact experiencing; and surely this is a kind of mistake which does quite com-

monly occur. Well, similarly, it is possible that some one of our friends should be believing now that one of us is hearing the noise of a brass-band, whereas in fact we are not. And even if it isn't at all likely that anyone is believing this now of us, we all know, I think, what such a belief would be like. Let us take, then, as our instance of a false belief, the belief which some one would now be having, if he were believing that *we are now hearing the noise of a brass-band*.

Well, if anyone were believing this now, he certainly would be making a mistake. There is no doubt that his belief would be false. And it seems to me that in this case there is as little doubt as possible as to what the essence of his mistake would consist in.

Surely the whole essence of the mistake would lie simply in this, that whereas, on the one hand, he would be believing that we are hearing the noise of a brass-band, the *fact* is on the other hand that we are *not* hearing it. And similarly it is quite plain what would be necessary to make this belief of his a true one. All that would be necessary would be simply that *we should* be hearing the noise in question. If *we were* hearing it, and he believed that we were, then his belief would be true. This surely does state correctly the difference between truth and falsehood in the case of this particular belief; and what I want to ask is: Supposing that it is a correct statement of the difference, what exactly is the difference that has been stated? What does this statement mean, if we try to put it more exactly?

Well, one point seems to me plain, to begin with, and this is a point on which I wish particularly to insist. The difference between truth and falsehood, in the case of this particular belief, does we have said, depend on whether in fact we are or are *not* now hearing the noise of a brass-band. Unless, therefore we can understand the difference between these two alternatives—between our being now hearing that noise, and our *not* being now hearing it, we certainly cannot understand the difference between the truth and falsehood of this belief. This is one essential point, though it is only one. And it seems to me that as to this point there really is no doubt at all. We are *not* now hearing the noise of a brass-band; and we all, I think, can understand quite clearly in one respect the nature of the fact which I express by saying that we are not. What these words imply is that there simply is no such thing in

the Universe as our being now hearing that particular kind of noise. The combination of us at this moment with the hearing of that particular kind of noise is a combination which simply has no being. There *is* no such combination. And we all do, I think, understand quite clearly what is meant by saying that there *is* no such thing. If you don't understand this, I'm afraid I can't make it any clearer. This distinction between there being such a thing as our now hearing that particular kind of noise and there being no such thing seems to me to be absolutely fundamental. And I want you to concentrate your attention upon this particular sense of the word "being"—the sense in which there certainly *is* no such thing as our being hearing now the noise of a brass-band. In one sense, at all events, there certainly *isn't*; and we all know that there *isn't*. And we can recognise the sense in which there *isn't*. And it is this particular sense of the word "being" that I want to get fixed. Using this sense of the word "being" we can at once say two things about the difference between the truth and falsehood of this particular belief—the belief that we *are* now hearing the noise of a brass-band. We can say, in the first place that since the belief is false, there simply *is* not in the Universe one thing which would be in it, if the belief were true. And we can say, in the second place, that this thing, which is simply absent from the Universe since the belief is false, and which would be present, if it were true, *is* that fact, whose nature is so unmistakable—the fact which would *be*, if we were now hearing the noise of a brass-band—the fact which would consist in our actually being now hearing it.

But now these two points by themselves don't suffice to give us a perfectly satisfactory *definition* of truth and falsehood. They don't suffice to tell us absolutely definitely what property it is that we should be attributing to this belief, if we were to say that it was true, nor yet what property it is that we are attributing to it now, when we say that it is false. They don't suffice to do this for a reason which I find it very difficult to explain clearly, but which I must do my best to indicate. They do *suggest* a definition; and the definition which they suggest is as follows: To say of this belief that it is true would be to say of it that the fact to which it refers *is*—that there is such a fact in the Universe as the fact to which it refers; while to say of it that it is false is to say of it that *the fact to which it refers* simply is not—that there is no such fact in the Universe. Here

we have a definition of what is meant by the truth and falsehood of this belief and a definition which I believe to be the right one; and it is a definition which *might* apply not only to this belief, but to all beliefs which we ever say are true or false. We might say quite generally: To say that a belief is true is to say always that *the fact to which it refers is* or has being, while to say of a belief that it is false is to say always, that the fact to which it refers, is not or has *no* being. But this definition is not perfectly satisfactory and definite because it leaves one point obscure: it leaves obscure what is meant by *the fact to which a belief refers*. In our particular case we happen to know what the fact to which the belief refers *is*: it is our being now hearing the noise of a brass-band, but when we say of this belief that it is false, we don't mean merely to say that we are not in fact hearing the noise of a brass-band. In merely saying this we are not attributing any property to the *belief* at all; whereas when we say that it is false, we certainly do mean to attribute to the belief itself some definite property, and that a property which it shares with other false beliefs. And it won't do to say either, that, when we say that it is false, all that we mean is simply that some fact or other is absent from the Universe. For every *different* false belief a *different* fact is absent from the Universe. And what we mean to say of each, when we say that it is false, is not merely that some *fact or other* is absent from the Universe, but that *the fact* to which it refers is so absent. But then the question is what is meant by *the fact to which it refers*? What *is* this relation which we call *referring to* a fact? In saying that there is such a relation, we imply that every true belief has some peculiar relation to one fact, and one fact only—every *different* true belief having the relation in question to a *different* fact. And we need to say what this relation is, in order to define perfectly satisfactorily what we mean by the fact to which a belief refers. *Can* we say what this relation is?

Well, it seems to me the only relation which quite obviously, at first sight, satisfies the requirement is as follows. Every true belief has to one fact and one fact only, *this* peculiar relation namely that we do use and have to use the *name* of the fact, in *naming* the belief. So that we might say: *The* fact to which a belief refers is always *the* fact which has the *same name* as that which we have to use in naming the belief.

This, I think, is true; and I want to insist upon it, because I think this partial identity between the name of a belief and the name of the fact to which it refers often leads to confusion, and often serves to conceal the true nature of the problem which we have to face. If we want to give a name to any belief—to point out what belief it is that we are talking about, and to distinguish it from other different beliefs, we always have to do it in the following way. We can only refer to it as *the belief that* so and so. One belief for instance is *the belief that "lions exist,"* another is *the belief that "bears exist,"* another is *the belief that "my scissors are lying on my table"* and so on. The only way we have of referring to these beliefs and pointing out *which* belief it is that we are talking of is by means of one of these expressions beginning with "that," or else by the equivalent verbal noun. Suppose, for instance, we want to talk about the belief that lions exist. How are we to refer to it? By what name are we to call it, which will show *which* belief we are talking about? Obviously its name just consists in the words I have just said: its name consists in the words "the belief that lions exist," or in the equivalent phrase "the belief in the existence of lions": it has absolutely no name except one or other of these two phrases: we can't refer to it, and point out which belief we mean in any other way. We can, therefore, only name beliefs by means of these expressions beginning with "that"—"*that* lions exist," "*that* bears exist" and so on, or the equivalent verbal nouns. But, curiously enough, if we want to name *the fact to which a belief refers*—the fact which *is*, if the belief be true, and *is not* if it be false—we can only do it by means of exactly the same expressions. If the belief that lions exist be true, then there is in the Universe, some fact which would not be at all if the belief were false. But what is this fact? What is its name? Surely this fact is the fact *that lions exist*. These words "that lions exist" constitute its name and there is no other way of referring to it than by these or some equivalent words. And these words you see are the very same words which we are obliged also to use in naming the belief. The belief *is* the belief *that lions exist*, and the fact, to which the belief refers, is the fact *that lions exist*.

It is, therefore, I think, true that *the fact to which a belief refers* is always the fact which *has the very same name* which we have to use in naming the belief. But obviously the fact

that this is the case won't do as a *definition* of what we mean by the fact to which a belief refers. It cannot possibly be the case that what we mean by saying that a belief is true, is merely that there is in the Universe the fact which *has the same name*. If this were so, no belief could possibly be true, until it had a name. It must be the case therefore that there is always some *other* relation between a true belief and the fact to which it refers—some *other* relation which is *expressed* by this identity of name.

The question, therefore, which we have to face is: What is the relation which always holds between a true belief and the fact to which it refers? The relation which we mean by calling the fact *the fact* to which the belief refers? The relation which we express by saying that the belief does refer to the fact?

Let us try to answer this question by considering again our particular instance of a belief. In this instance, we have the advantage of knowing very clearly what the *fact* would be like, which would *be*, if the belief were true. We all know what it would be like, if we *were* now hearing the noise of a brass-band. And this fact, which certainly *isn't*, is what would *be*, if the particular belief in question were true. In order, therefore, to discover how this fact, if there were such a fact, *would* be related to the belief, we have, it might seem, only to discover what the belief itself is like. And this is where the difficulty would seem to lie. *If* some person were believing now that we are hearing the noise of a brass-band, in what would this belief of his consist? What is the correct analysis of the event that would be happening in his mind?

This is a question which it is certainly not easy to answer. But there is one very simple and natural answer to it, which suggests a correspondingly simple theory as to what is the relation between a belief and *the fact* to which it refers. And I want first, therefore, to give this simple and natural answer to the question as to the analysis of beliefs, together with the simple theory which it suggests as to the distinction between truth and falsehood.

The answer as to the analysis of beliefs is this. It says that, in the case of every belief without exception, whether it be true or whether it be false, we can always distinguish two constituents—namely, the *act* of belief, on the one hand, and the *object* of belief or what *is* believed on the other. The *act* of belief is something which is of the same nature in abso-

tutely all cases. Whether I believe that twice two are four, or something so different as that lions exist, the *act* of belief which I perform is of exactly the same kind in both cases. What constitutes the difference between the two cases, is that the *objects* of belief are different. And we may, if we like, call the object of belief, in absolutely all cases, a "*proposition*." Only, if we do so, we must be careful to distinguish propositions in this sense, from propositions, which consist merely in a form of *words*. "Proposition" in the sense in which, upon this theory, the object of belief is always a proposition, is *not* a name for any mere form of words. It is a name for what is *expressed* by certain forms of words—those, namely, which, in grammar, are called "sentences." It is a name for what is before your mind, when you not only hear or read but *understand* a sentence. It is, in short, the *meaning* of a sentence—what is expressed or conveyed by a sentence: and is, therefore, utterly different from the sentence itself—from the mere words. And it certainly does seem, at first sight, as if there were such things as propositions in this sense; and as if whenever we believe anything we are believing some proposition. The reasons for distinguishing in every case between the act of belief on the one side, and the proposition believed on the other, seem very strong. What is quite certain is that when, for instance, one man believes that lions exist, and another man believes that bears exist, these two beliefs resemble one another in respect of the fact that they are both of them acts of belief; and also that they differ from one another in respect of the fact that one of them is the belief that lions exist and the other the belief that bears exist. But in what does this difference consist? It seems difficult to see how it can consist in anything else than that the one belief has a specific kind of relation to one object, while the other has the same kind of relation to a different object. And the natural view certainly is that the two different objects concerned are in the one case, the proposition that lions exist, and in the other, the proposition that bears exist. And if this is a true account of the difference between two different true beliefs; it is quite obvious that it is a true account of the difference between two different false beliefs. If one child believes falsely that griffins exist, and another believes falsely that centaurs exist; it is quite equally obvious here that the two beliefs resemble one another in respect of the fact that both are acts of belief, but that never-

theless, the two differ from one another in respect of the fact that one is the belief that griffins exist while the other is the belief that centaurs exist. And there is the same reason here, as in the case of true beliefs, for saying that the difference consists in the fact that the one belief has a specific relation to *the proposition* that griffins exist and the other the same relation to *the proposition* that centaurs exist.

This, then, is one theory which may be held as to the constitution of beliefs—the theory that every belief whether it be true or false always has an *object* which may be called a proposition, and that the belief simply consists in having this proposition before the mind in one particular way—in being conscious of it in the peculiar way which we call "believing." And what I want you to notice about this theory is that according to it, *what* is believed—the *object*—the proposition, is something which *is*—there really *is* such a thing in the Universe, *equally* whether the belief be true or false. If, for instance, we believe that lions exist, then whether this belief be true or false, there is such a thing as "that lions exist," there is such a thing as "the existence of lions"; because these phrases "that lions exist," or "The existence of lions" are a name for *what* is believed—for the proposition that is believed. But this fact creates a difficulty—for as we have seen, it is also the case that it is *only if* the belief be true, that there is such a thing as the existence of lions: if the belief be false, there is no such fact as the existence of lions. What, therefore, this theory must admit, is that, whenever a belief is *true*, there are in the Universe two quite different facts, having exactly the same name, namely (1) the *object* of the belief, the proposition that lions exist, which would be in the Universe equally, even if the belief were false, and (2) the *other* fact that lions exist, the fact, which we should usually call "the fact that lions exist," which *is* in the Universe only if the belief be *true*. *Both* these two facts are or have being if the belief be true, in exactly the same sense; but since only one of them *is*, if the belief be false, it follows that they must be different from one another, in spite of the fact that they have exactly the same name. The fact that this theory compels us to say that, whenever a belief is true, there thus are in the Universe two different facts, having exactly *the same name*, does I think, suggest a suspicion that the theory is false. But, of course, it is not absolutely fatal to it. It might be the case that we really

do thus give the same name to two quite different facts. But what I want to insist on is that the theory *must* admit that the two facts *are* different, in spite of having the *same name*: that they *only* have the same name, and that we must not be led by this into supposing that they are identical.

So much by way of explaining what this theory as to the analysis of belief is. But as I said, this theory also suggests a very simple theory as to the relation of a true belief to the fact to which it *refers*. And, in so doing, it suggests also a new theory as to what truth *is*—a new theory, not incompatible with the old one; since, whereas the former theory only pretended to define the property, which we ascribe to *beliefs* when we call them true, this only suggests that there is another property also called “truth,” which belongs *not* to *beliefs*, but only to the *objects* of belief or propositions.

What then is the theory of truth, which this theory as to the analysis of belief suggests? It is a theory which I myself formerly held, and which certainly has the advantage that it is very simple. It is simply this. It adopts the supposition that in the case of every belief, true or false, there is a proposition which is what is believed, and which certainly is. But the difference between a true and a false belief it says, consists simply in this, that where the belief is true the proposition, which is believed, besides the fact that it *is* or “has being” also has another simple unanalysable property which may be called “truth.” “Truth,” therefore, would, on this view, be a simple unanalysable property which is possessed by some propositions and not by others. The propositions which don’t possess it, and which therefore we call false, *are* or “have being”—just as much as those which *do*; only they just have *not* got this additional property of being “true.” And the explanation of those two different facts having the same name, which *are* in the Universe if a belief is true, and one of which is absent if it is false, and of their relation to one another, would be simply as follows. One of these two facts, the one that *is* equally whether the belief be true or false, is of course, the proposition. And the other one, the one which *is* only if the belief be true, consists simply in the possession by the proposition of the simple property “truth.”

We should thus have to say that the real existence of lions—the fact to which the belief “that lions exist” *refers*—consists simply in the possession by the *proposition* “that lions

exist” of one simple property. And this would explain, quite simply, what we mean by saying that the fact is *the* one to which the belief refers. The belief in question is the belief in the proposition “that lions exist” and hence the *truth* of that particular proposition is a fact which has to the belief a relation which no other fact has to it. The relation simply consists in the fact that this fact *is* the truth of the particular proposition which is the object of the belief. We should, of course, have to admit that we do give the same name—the name “that lions exist” or “the existence of lions” *both* to the mere proposition *and* to the truth of this proposition, i.e., to its possession of the simple property “truth.” But if we have to admit, in any case, that where a belief is true, there *are* two different facts in the Universe having the same name, namely (1) the proposition and (2) the fact to which the belief refers, there seems no particular reason why this fact, which has the same name as the proposition, should not simply consist in the truth of the proposition. And as I said, this theory that truth is the name of a simple property, which belongs to some propositions and not to others, is quite consistent with our former definition of truth. Our former definition was that to say that a belief is true is to say that there *is* in the Universe *the fact* to which it refers. And we can still maintain the definition along with the new one. We should only have to admit that there are two different senses of the word “truth,” one of which applies to propositions, and the other to beliefs. And it is quite certain that there *are* at least two different senses of the word “truth,” since we certainly do say that sentences—mere forms of words—are true,¹ as well as the beliefs which they express; and no mere form of words can be true, in the same sense in which a belief is so. If, therefore, we have to admit *two* different senses of the word “truth,” one of which, can be defined by reference to the other, why should we not admit a third sense, by reference to which both the others are defined? It would only be admitting that there is (1) one ultimate sense of the word, namely that in which *some* propositions are true, and nothing but a proposition can be; and then, two derivative senses; namely (2) that in which some beliefs are true, and nothing but a belief can be, and (3)

¹ I see no reason now to think that we ever do call sentences or forms of words “true,” except in such an archaic-sounding expression as “A true word is often spoken in jest.” (1952).

that in which some forms of words are true, and nothing but a form of words can be.

We have, then, here a theory of truth which would force us to recognize *two* ultimate and unanalysable notions or properties, the one the property of "being" which is possessed by all propositions equally, whether true or false, and by many other things as well; and the other a property which may be called "truth" a property which can only be possessed by propositions, and *is* only possessed by *some* among them—those which don't possess it being called "false," though they have "being." This theory is, I think, a very simple and a very natural one; and I must confess I can't find any conclusive arguments against it. But yet I don't now believe that it is true, though I did formerly. And the chief objections to it—the objections which weigh with me most, though I confess I can't make either of them seem perfectly clear and convincing—are, I think, two. The first is an objection which affects only this particular theory of truth: it does not affect the theory as to the analysis of belief which this theory of truth presupposes.

It is this: namely, that the fact to which a true belief refers—the fact, which *is*, only if the belief be true, and simply has no being at all, if it be false—does not, if you think of it, seem to consist merely in the possession of some simple property by a proposition—that is to say, by something which has being equally whether the belief be true or false. For instance, the fact that lions really do exist does not seem to consist in the possession of some simple property by the proposition which we believe, when we believe that they exist, even if we grant that there is such a thing as this proposition. The relation of the proposition to the fact doesn't seem to consist simply in the fact that the proposition is a constituent of the fact—one of the elements of which it is composed. This is an objection only to this particular theory as to the constitution of the fact to which a true belief refers. But the second objection is an objection not only to this theory but to the whole analysis of beliefs on which it rests; it is an objection to the supposition that there are such things as propositions at all, and that belief consists merely in an attitude of mind towards these supposed entities. And here again I confess I can't put the objection in any clear and convincing way. But this is the sort of objection I feel. It is that, if you consider

what happens when a man entertains a false belief, it doesn't seem as if his belief consisted merely in his having a relation to some object which certainly *is*. It seems rather as if the thing he was believing, the *object* of his belief, were just *the* fact which certainly is *not*—which certainly is not, because his belief is false. This, of course, creates a difficulty, because if the object certainly is *not*—if there *is* no such thing, it is impossible for him or for anything else to have any kind of relation to it. In order that a relation may hold between two things, both the two things must certainly be; and how then is it possible for any one to believe in a thing which simply has no being? This is the difficulty, which seems to arise if you say that false belief does not consist merely in a relation between the believer or the act of belief on the one hand, and something else which certainly *is* on the other. And I confess I do not see any clear solution of the difficulty. But nevertheless I am inclined to think this is what we must say. And certain things can, I think, be said to make the view more plausible.

What I think is quite certain is that when we have before us a sentence—a form of words—which *seems* to express a relation between two objects, we must not always assume that the names, which seem to be names of objects between which a relation holds, are always really names of any object at all. This may be exemplified by what is happening to us in the present case. We have been conceiving, for the purpose of our illustration, the hypothesis of our being now actually hearing the noise of a brass-band. We were conceiving this when we said that this is what *would* be happening *if* the belief that we are doing so were true. We certainly *can* conceive this hypothesis: we know what it would be like if we were actually hearing the noise. And in this mere supposing—in merely conceiving an hypothesis without at all believing in it, as in the present case—exactly the same difficulty arises as in the case of false belief. "We are now conceiving the hypothesis of our being now actually hearing a brass-band." That *sentence*—the words I have just used—seem to state the facts. And what they seem to state is that there is a relation—the relation which we express by "conceiving"—between *us* on the one hand, and on the other hand an object of which the name is "our being now hearing the noise of a brass-band." But, as we have seen and as is obvious, there *is* nothing at all which is named by this name: there *is* no such thing as our

being now hearing that noise. And though you may reply: "Yes there is such a thing; there *is* the *proposition* that we are now hearing that noise; *this* is what we conceive; and this most certainly *is*: the *only* thing which *is not* is the fact which would *be*, if the proposition were true"—though you may make this reply and may thus recur to the theory that there may be two different things having the same name, and that though only *one* of them *is* in the present case, yet that one most undoubtedly *is*: yet surely this reply is not perfectly satisfactory. In merely making it, in distinguishing between the proposition which *is*, and the fact, having the same name, which you admit, in this case, *is not* you are surely conceiving *both*: you could not even say that the fact is *not*, without conceiving it. And hence the conclusion remains that when we say: "I am conceiving our being now hearing the noise of a brass-band"; though this statement seems to express a relation between us on the one hand, and another object having the name "Our being now hearing the noise of a brass-band" on the other, yet sometimes at all events it does *not* do this—sometimes, at all events, the latter form of words is *not* a name for anything at all. And once you admit that this is sometimes the case, it seems to me there ceases to be any reason at all for supposing that there *ever* are those two different facts, having the same name—the proposition, on the one hand, and the fact on the other. If, in some cases, when we conceive or believe a thing, there really *is* no such thing as that which we *are said* to believe or conceive—if *sometimes* the words which we seem to use to denote the thing believed or conceived, is not really a *name* of anything at all, I think there is no reason why we should not admit that this is *always* the case in false belief, or in conception of what is purely imaginary. We should then have to say that expressions of the form "I believe so and so," "I conceive so and so," though they do undoubtedly express *some* fact, do *not* express any relation between *me* on the other hand and an object of which the name is the words we use to say *what* we believe or conceive. And since there seems plainly no difference, in mere analysis, between false belief and true belief, we should have to say of all belief and supposition generally, that they *never* consist in a relation between the believer and something else which *is* what is believed. Suppose, for instance, that I believe that lions exist, and that this belief is true. There *is* in this

case, because the belief is true, a fact having the name "that lions exist," but my *belief* itself does not consist in a relation between me and that fact, nor between me and any other fact having the same name. The fact that my belief is *true* does, of course, imply that there *is* a relation between me and that fact. But it is the *truth* of my belief which consists in that relation: the belief itself does *not* consist in it. Although we say "I am believing in the existence of lions," these words "the existence of lions" don't stand, in this expression, either for *the* fact, which *is*, nor for any fact at all to which I have a relation. They are not a name for anything at all. The whole expression "I am believing in the existence of lions" is, of course, a name for a fact. But we cannot analyse this fact into a relation between me on the one hand, and a proposition called "the existence of lions" on the other. This is the theory as to the analysis of belief which I wish to recommend. It may be expressed by saying that there simply are no such things as *propositions*. That belief does *not* consist, as the former theory held, in a relation between the believer, on the one hand, and another thing which may be called the proposition believed. And it seems to me that one at least of the most obvious objections to this theory can be easily answered. It might be thought that if there *are* no such things as propositions then whenever we make statements about them (as we constantly do and must do) all these statements must be nonsense. But this result does not by any means necessarily follow. Of course we can, and must, still continue to talk *as if* there were such things as propositions. We can and must continue to use such expressions as "the proposition that lions exist," "the proposition that 2 plus 2 equals 5"—that is to say, we can and must use *sentences*, in which these expressions occur; and many of these sentences will express a fact. For instance the sentence: "The proposition that 2 plus 2 equals 4 is true," will still be used and will express a fact. All that our theory compels us to say is that one part of this expression, namely the words "The proposition that 2 plus 2 equals 4," though it seems to be the name of something, is not really a name for anything at all, whereas the whole expression, "The proposition that 2 plus 2 equals 4 is true" is a name for a fact and a most important fact; and all that our theory says is that we must not suppose that this fact can be analysed into a fact called "the proposition that twice two are four" and a relation

between this fact on the one hand and truth on the other. This is all that the theory requires. It does not require that we should discontinue the use of these expressions, which are not names for anything; or that we should suppose that sentences in which they occur can't be true.² On the contrary such sentences will be true just as often as before; and will often be the most convenient way of expressing important facts. Nor will they, as a rule, be misleading. They will only be misleading, if they lead us to make a mistake as to the analysis of the fact which they express, or to suppose that every expression which seems to be a name of something must be so in fact.

But this theory as to the analysis of belief is, of course, only a negative theory. It tells us that beliefs can *not* be analysed in a certain way—that they cannot be analysed into the act of belief on the one hand and the thing believed on the other—but it does not tell us how they can be analysed; and therefore, it gives us no help at all towards solving our original question—the question as to what exactly is the relation between a true belief and the *fact* to which it refers—the relation which we express by saying that the fact in question is *the* fact to which the belief refers. Possibly some positive analysis of a belief *can* be given, which would enable us to answer this question; but I know of none which seems to be perfectly clear and satisfactory. I propose, therefore, to give up the attempt to analyse beliefs. I think it must be admitted that there is a difficulty and a great difficulty in the analysis of them; and I do not know that any one would say they had a theory about the matter which was quite certainly true.

But if we thus admit that we don't know precisely what the analysis of a belief is, does it follow that we must also admit that we don't know what truth is, and what is the difference between truth and falsehood? It might seem as if it did; for how we were led into this discussion as to the nature of beliefs, was because we found an obscurity in our proposed definition of truth, which it seemed impossible we could en-

² I should, of course, now say that such sentences can't be true, because our present use of "true" is such that it is nonsense to say of any *sentence*, that it is true. (See footnote, p. 285). I should, therefore, substitute in this sentence and the next the words "express a truth" for the words "be true." (1952)

tirely clear up except by discovering exactly what sort of a thing a belief is. And I think it is true that the failure to analyse belief, does mean a corresponding failure to give a complete analysis of the property we mean by "truth." But the point I want to insist on is that nevertheless we may know perfectly clearly and definitely, in one respect, what truth is; and that this thing which we may know about it is by far the most important and essential thing to know. In short, it seems to me that these questions as to the analysis of belief are quite irrelevant to *the* most important question as to the nature of truth. And I want to insist on this, because I think it is very easy not to distinguish clearly the different questions; and to suppose that because, in one respect, we must admit a doubt as to the nature of truth, this doubt should also throw doubt on other more important matters, which are really quite independent of it.

Let me try to state the matter quite precisely, and to explain what I think is quite certain about truth, and how this much can be certain in spite of the doubt as to the nature of belief. What I proposed to give as the definition of truth was as follows. To say that a belief is true is to say that the *fact to which it refers* is or has being; while to say that a belief is false is to say that the fact to which it refers is not—that there is no such fact. Or, to put it another way, we might say: Every belief has the property of *referring* to some particular fact, every different belief to a different fact; and *the* property which a belief has, when it is true—the property which we name when we call it true, is the property which can be expressed by saying that *the* fact to which it refers *is*. This is precisely what I propose to submit as the fundamental definition of truth. And the difficulty we found about it was that of defining exactly what is meant by "*referring to*," by talking of *the* fact to which a belief refers. Obviously this expression "referring to" stands for some relation which each true belief has to one fact and to one only; and which each false belief has to no fact at all; and the difficulty was to define this relation. Well, I admit I can't define it, in the sense of analysing it completely: I don't think this can be done, without analysing belief. But obviously from the fact that we can't analyse it, it doesn't follow that we may not know perfectly well *what* the relation is; we may be perfectly well *acquainted* with it; it may be perfectly familiar to us; and we

may know both that there is such a relation, and that this relation is essential to the definition of truth. And what I want to point out is that we do in this sense *know* this relation; that we are perfectly familiar with it; and that we can, therefore, perfectly well understand this definition of *truth*, though we may not be able to analyse it down to its simplest terms. Take any belief you like; it is, I think, quite plain that there is just one fact, and only one, which would have being—would be in the Universe, if the belief were true; and which would have no being—would simply *not be*, if the being were false. And as soon as we know what the belief is, we know just as well and as certainly what the fact is which in this sense corresponds with it. Any doubt as to the nature of the fact is at the same time a doubt as to the nature of the belief. If we don't know exactly what the nature of the belief is, to that extent we don't know the nature of the corresponding fact; but exactly in proportion as we *do* know the nature of the belief, we also know the nature of the corresponding fact. Take, for instance, the belief that lions exist. You may say you don't know exactly what is meant by the existence of lions—what the fact is, which would *be*, if the belief were true and would not be if it were false. But, if you don't know this, then to exactly the same extent you don't know either what the belief is—you don't know what it is to *believe* that lions exist. Or take a much more difficult instance: take a belief in a hypothetical proposition such as "If it rains tomorrow we shan't be able to have our picnic." It is, I admit, very difficult to be sure exactly what sort of a fact is expressed by a hypothetical sentence. Many people might say that it oughtn't to be called a fact at all. But nevertheless it is quite natural to say: It *is* a fact that *if* such and such a thing were to happen, such and such a result would follow; we use this expression as exactly equivalent to "It is true that, if such and such a thing were to happen, such and such a result would follow," and we may be right or wrong in believing that the consequence would follow from the hypothesis, just as much as we may about anything else. And it is I think quite plain that any doubt as to the nature of the fact expressed by a hypothetical sentence, is equally a doubt as to the nature of the corresponding belief. If you don't know what fact it is that *is* when you believe truly that "If it rains tomorrow, we shan't have our picnic" you also, and precisely to the same

extent, don't know what it is to *believe* this. It is, then, I think, quite obvious that for every different belief, there is one fact and one fact only, which would *be*, if the belief were true, and would *not be*, if it were false; and that in every case we know what the fact in question is just as well or as badly as we know what the belief is. We know that this is so; and of course we could not know it, unless we were *acquainted* with the relation between the fact and the belief, in virtue of which just the one fact and one fact only corresponds to each different belief. I admit that the analysis of this relation is difficult. But any attempt to analyse it, of course, presupposes that there is such a relation and that we are acquainted with it. If we weren't acquainted with it, we couldn't even try to analyse it; and if we didn't already know that this relation is *the* relation that is essential to the defining of truth, of course our analysis, however successful, wouldn't get us any nearer to a definition of truth.

I think, therefore, that the most essential point to establish about truth is merely that every belief *does refer*, in a sense which we are perfectly familiar with, though we may not be able to define it, to *one* fact and one fact only, and that to say of a belief that it is true is merely to say that *the* fact to which it refers *is*; while to say of it that it is false is merely to say that the fact to which it refers, *is not*—that there is no such fact. Of course, this may be disputed; but what I want to insist on is that merely in saying this we are stating a clear view, and a view which may be discussed and settled, *without* entering into any questions as to the analysis of belief. And as for the reasons for believing that this is the right definition of truth, they can I think be seen as clearly as anywhere by considering our original instance. Suppose a man were believing now that we *are* hearing the noise of a brass-band. We know quite well what the fact is which *would be* if the belief were true. We also know quite well what the belief is, and that it is something utterly different from the fact, since the belief might certainly *be* at this moment, although the *fact* most certainly *is not*. And we know quite well that this belief, if it did now exist in anybody's mind, would be false. What *is* the property then which this belief (if it existed) would share with other false beliefs, and which we should mean to ascribe to it by saying that it was false? Surely this property simply consists in the fact that *the fact to which it refers*—namely our

being now hearing the noise of a brass-band—has no being; and surely we do know quite well, though we may not be able to define, the exact relation between the belief and the fact, which we thus express by saying that this particular fact is *the* fact to which that particular belief *refers*?

Chapter 15

True and False Beliefs

DISCUSSION OF CHAPTER 14 shewed that it was not quite clear to everyone in exactly what sense I was using the word “belief.” So I should like first of all to try to make this clear. A difficulty seemed to be felt because I implied that we might and did commonly *believe* things, even when we were not quite certain or sure about them; and it was suggested that some people, at all events, would never say that they believed a thing, unless they meant that they were quite certain of it. Now it seems to me that in ordinary life we all do constantly make a distinction between merely believing a thing and being quite sure of it; and I will give an instance of the sort of occasion on which we do make this distinction. Suppose two friends of mine are talking about me, at the time of year when people go away for their holidays, and one of them asks: “Is Moore still in London, or has he gone away for his holidays?” Surely the other might quite naturally reply, “I *believe* he is still in London, but I am not quite sure.” Surely such language is one of the commonest possible occurrences; and everybody would understand what was meant by it. That is to say, we constantly have cases, where a man quite definitely says: I *do believe* a thing, but I am *not* quite sure of it; and we all of us, I think, understand quite well the distinction between the two states of mind referred to, the one called *merely* “believing” and the other called “being sure,” and we know that the first may and does constantly occur, where the second is absent. It is easy to multiply similar instances quite indefinitely. For instance, you may ask a member of your family: Has the postman come yet this morning? and get the

answer: I believe he has, but I'm not quite sure. And you would never suspect that the person who gave this answer was using words out of their proper senses, or was not stating truly what was the state of his own mind. He *does* really “believe,” in a quite ordinary sense of the word, that the postman has come; and yet it is equally true, that though he does believe it, he is *not* quite sure of it. Or you may go into a shop and ask: Has the parcel I ordered this morning been sent off yet? and the shopman may reply: “I believe it has, sir, but I am not quite sure. Shall I enquire?” Have you not constantly heard people say things like this; and don't you constantly say them yourselves? I don't know how to convince you how excessively common this distinction between “believing” and “being certain” is, if these instances are not sufficient.

But I should be exceedingly surprised if there is a single one of you, who does not, in fact, constantly use language in this way—constantly say and say quite truly, that he does “believe” a thing, of which he is *not* quite sure. I think, therefore, that so far as I applied the name “belief” to a state of mind *different* from that of absolute certainty, I was using the word perfectly correctly and in one of its very commonest senses. But then it was suggested that, if “belief” is thus to be used as a name for something short of absolute certainty, there is no difference between such belief and mere imagination. And here again it is, I think, easy to show that, as a mere question of *language* there is a distinction; that we do, in fact, often distinguish between the two. And this may be shown in the following way. Consider again the first instance I gave; where one friend of mine asks another, “Is Moore still in London, or has he gone away for his holidays?” In such a case as this, it is, I think, quite plain that the person asked does, in a sense, imagine *both* alternative—*both* my being in London, and my being gone away—he conceives them both, has them both before his mind; and yet in spite of this, he certainly may “believe” the one and *not* believe the other. Instead of saying, as I first supposed: “I believe he is still in London, but I'm not quite sure,” he might answer equally naturally, “I *don't* believe he has gone away, but I'm not quite sure.” That is to say, we certainly do say, and say quite truly that we *don't* believe things which nevertheless we are imagining or conceiving, even when we are using “belief” as a name for something short of absolute certainty. This shews quite