*Café Philo*

Does truth matter?

Tuesday 4th July 2017, Professor Gerard Kilroy

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In an era of “post-truth” (the word of the year in 2016) politics, truth is said to matter less than emotional preference. During the recent Brexit campaign, promises were made that were known to be untrue, and on both sides of the Atlantic immigrants were made the easy scapegoats for social ills. Yet the problem lies deeper. The desire for toleration seems to have moved us all towards a relativist position where there is merely a basket of personal truths, yours and mine. Relativism has become not merely the default approach to ethics, enhanced by a culture where rights rather than duties predominate, but a required position on all matters.

 This wider kind of philosophical uncertainty can be traced back to men like A. J. Ayer and Sir Isaiah Berlin, who wrote, many years ago, that “propositions are either certain and uninformative or informative and not certain”. But when we say something is true, we do not mean it is just true for us, but that it is true for all men and all time; as Wittgenstein wrote, “Not how the world is, is the mystical, but *that* it is.” Philosophical truths are not subject to change in the same way as empirical truths in natural science. The discoveries of Copernicus, the theory of relativity and the uncertainty principle have all overturned long-cherished beliefs on how the world exists, but no empirical discovery will change the truth of the world’s existence as such, or the truth that eternity is not endless time, but outside or beyond time.

            Both in our private lives and in the public sphere, we set great store by truth. The criminal bar still tries forensically to uncover the truth, and there are heavy penalties for perjury or the perversion of the course of justice. A Member of Parliament may be forgiven many things, but he may not lie to the House. The culture of public enquiry insists that the truth – of Bloody Sunday, the invasion of Iraq, Hillsborough and Grenfell Tower – should be disclosed, even if that means spending many years and millions of pounds. Historians are always trying to uncover neglected or hidden truths, and these new details often profoundly change our perceptions, both about the past and the present. The revelation that Winston Churchill skillfully and tactfully attempted to attract Labour politicians, a former Liberal leader and an unelected Trades Union official to form a government of national unity, in May 1940, modifies the picture of what made him a successful wartime leader (flexibility not just dogged determination) and offers instructive parallels for how we might now overcome the greatest crisis Britain has faced since that war.

“What is truth?” Pontius Pilate’s famous question suggests a sceptical, perhaps even a relativist position, for a servant of the Roman Empire caught up in a little local difficulty; the silence of the response suggests that Jesus doubted whether Pilate was seriously interested in the answer. The distrust of modern politicians, from Vladimir Putin to Donald Trump and Boris Johnson is the disturbing effect of their increased reliance on marketing, presentation and public relations. Special advisers have replaced Cabinet government, as David Owen has been arguing, and the medium has become the message, whether painted on the side of a bus or posted on Facebook. This leaves our culture very vulnerable to those who believe in absolute, if terrible, truths. If we cannot say that some things are intrinsically wicked, and not culturally conditioned, how can we condemn those who behead innocent men, women and children?

Are there some absolute truths? Are some things true regardless of whether anyone perceives them? Is truth itself absolute, or are all truths relative and all moral values culturally conditioned?