# About True Sentences and Decisions

In the episode concerning the riverboat trip, Lisa and her classmates are dealing with the question of what makes sentences true. Three different ideas are exemplified. First, during a boat trip, Mark throws some water on Harry in order to make him agree that the sentence "water is wet" is a true sentence. Harry does agree with Mark, noting that "sentences are true when they correspond to facts."[1] Second, Tony tells he has dreamed he was in China. It seemed to him it was reality. When asked about how he is sure that it was just a dream and not reality, he answers that he couldn't have been in China without having traveled there first, and he knew he had not traveled. He says it would not have been consistent to have been in China without having traveled there. He says, "What happened in the dream was not consistent with everything else in my life. It wasn't consistent, so it wasn't true." Third, some of the kids get lost. While discussing what they should do to find their way again, three ideas were given: to use a compass, (which was impossible since none of them had brought one), to look on a map (which was also impossible for the same reason), and to follow the stream they were facing, in the hope that it flew to the river, where they had been earlier so that they could see where they had to go. Since they all agreed this idea was worth trying, ... "the six of them walked along the bank of the stream."[2] As it came out, it worked well. They did get to where they wanted. From this they learn that sometimes to decide (know) whether a given sentence is true or not, one has to test the idea and check over if it works or not. It works only if it is true.

In all situations above, the children made use, mainly without noting it, of previous knowledge they had. One must know what the word "wet", for instance, means in order to be able to decide if "the water is wet" is a true sentence or not. Mark points out that he must check over the different facts of his life to decide if there is consistency. To do so, he must know some facts. He must have some certainty derived from his previous life. To decide if following the stream is an idea worth trying, one must have a previous knowledge that all streams flow to some other streams or rivers or lakes or the ocean. Water always runs to where there is more water, except the ocean water. Only from the sentences, one can (usually) *not* decide if it is true or not. Before choosing a method to verify the veracity, one must be sure to understand what the sentence says, what it is all about.

The three sentences the kids use relate to reality. China is a concrete place, one can touch its soil; water is touchable and the lost children had only two possibilities (they would or would not find their way). If they did find their way, they would perceive it (as in fact they did), since they could see if they were in the place they wanted to be. It was possible to touch the governor's house from where they had departed.

John Dewey, in his book *Reconstruction in Philosophy,* points out how philosophical thought should follow modern scientific thought. In chapter 6, he discusses about what is important to thought. He reveals that, "the first relevant characteristic in the act of thinking is to face the facts, investigate them, observe them and inspect them minutely".[4] He also says that observation is not an end in itself, but just an investigation looking for proofs of previous ideas. He points out during the whole book that philosophy does not have to search for the "one and only" truth and/or good. Dewey believes that the world, as nature, keeps changing and therefore it is not possible to have a non-changeable theory to it. He writes: "True is what leads us to truth".[5] Shortly after that, he explains that the true hypothesis is the one that works adequately. (In the very same case of the third example mentioned above).

Truth, as having to be verified each time is always a particular situation. It cannot be absolute. "Today it is raining" is a sentence that must be verified every day. It might be true as I write this paper and it might be false as you are reading it. And whether it is true or false is always a particular case that teaches us nothing about what its value will be tomorrow or what it was yesterday. The fact that a true sentence always has to be verified makes it impossible for a moral code to exist. As Dewey says: "Moral is not a catalogue of acts ... what moral needs is specific research and planning methods."[6]

As the moral act is a voluntary act, it requires the study of the circumstances; that is, the search for the true conditions that affect it. Moral acts depend always on the various circumstances that previously or simultaneously occur. Therefore, every act must be reflected upon, before it happens. Also, every moral act will help to form the knowledge that will contribute to further decisions about other moral acts.

The recognition of a true sentence is a passage from an open situation of possibilities to another situation of larger knowledge. By deciding if a given sentence is true or not, one learns, more than learning the truth contained in that sentence, how to decide and one improves one's own ability in doing that. This is the major benefit, since that ability will be of use throughout life.

The importance of learning how to search for the truth value of a sentence is that truths are fundamental elements to making decisions. One decides about things upon the basis of certain reasons. Reasons are the situations one knows (or wants to know) that will lead to making a decision. Sometimes our reasons are true sentences and other times false sentences. Therefore, each reason has a different influence upon our decisions.

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Footnotes

1. Lipman, M., *Lisa,* p. 82.
2. Ibid, p. 82.
3. Ibid, p. 83.
4. Dewey, J., *Reconstrucao em Filosofia,* p. 143.
5. Ibid, p. 154.
6. Ibid, p. 164.

Bibliography

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Dewey, J. *Reconstrucao em Filosofia.* traducao de Antonio Pinto de Carvalho, revista por Anisio Teixeira, 2 edicao, Cia. Editora Nacional, Sao Paulo, 1959.