

PHILOSOPHY IN  
*THE TWILIGHT ZONE*

EDITED BY

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LESTER H. HUNT

 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

This edition first published 2009  
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Blackwell Publishing was acquired by John Wiley & Sons in February 2007. Blackwell's publishing program has been merged with Wiley's global Scientific, Technical, and Medical business to form Wiley-Blackwell.

*Registered Office*

John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, United Kingdom

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*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Philosophy in the Twilight zone / edited by Noël Carroll and Lester H. Hunt.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.  
ISBN 978-1-4051-4904-4 (hardcover : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-1-4051-4905-1 (pbk. : alk. paper)  
1. Twilight zone (Television program : 1959–1964) 2. Philosophy. I. Carroll, Noël, 1947–  
II. Hunt, Lester H., 1946–  
PN1992.77.T87P45 2009  
791.45'72—dc22

2008041556

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Set in 11/13pt Dante by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong  
Printed in Singapore by Ho Printing Pte Ltd

01 2009

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# 9

## EPISTEMOLOGY AT 20,000 FEET

SHEILA LINTOTT

*You unlock this door with the key of imagination. Beyond it is another dimension – a dimension of sound, a dimension of sight, a dimension of mind. You're moving into a land of both shadow and substance, of things and ideas. You've just crossed over into the Twilight Zone!*

*Opening Introduction to "Nightmare at 20,000 Feet"*

Epistemology is the branch of philosophy concerned with theories of knowledge and related questions of truth and justification. Although in everyday life we are accustomed to making many knowledge claims, we tend to be very poor epistemologists. We claim to know all sorts of things for which our evidence, in all honesty, is dubious and rarely considered. Some knowledge claims we make explicitly. For example, when boarding an airplane, I might make a series of explicit knowledge claims about the destination of the plane or how long the trip will take. Other of our knowledge claims are made more tacitly. For example, when trying to find my seat on a plane, I make a whole host of implicit assumptions: that I exist, that the plane exists, that the windows look out onto the real world (and aren't television sets or the like), that my perception is trust-

## EPISTEMOLOGY AT 20,000 FEET

worthy, and so on. Although all such claims rest on conceptions of truth and knowledge, very few of us have coherent and clear conceptions of what it really means for a belief to be true or when it is accurate to claim to have knowledge. In everyday life we don't bother ourselves much with such abstract issues as *What is truth?* or *What is knowledge?* We assume we know what truth is and then we go about attempting to discern the true from the false; we assert that we know lots of things and we never give a second thought to the justification of these knowledge claims. And we certainly don't spend much time considering whether the claims that seem obviously true to us are actually known to us. For example, before taking my seat on an airplane I don't entertain the possibility that it is a hologram. Of course it seems to be real, but things aren't always as they seem. Maybe my senses are deceiving me into thinking that there is a seat in front of me. How do I *know* that it isn't an illusion? Isn't it *possible* that it doesn't really exist? No, we don't bother ourselves with such matters; it seems that only an insane person would spend time pondering veracity and justification in such straightforward situations, well, an insane person or a philosopher. To ponder such things, to sincerely wonder if you can trust your senses, to consider whether your most basic assumptions are true, to look for justification where others find self-evident truths, this is a feat that requires imagination, for it requires the ability to imagine that you may be wrong regarding some basic assumption about the nature of the world and your place in it.

The episode of *The Twilight Zone* called "Nightmare at 20,000 Feet" encourages us to imagine that possibility. In "Nightmare at 20,000 Feet," based on a short story of the same name by Richard Matheson, we meet Robert Wilson (played by William Shatner). Wilson is a leery and weary traveler, who is boarding a plane with his wife. Wilson's leeryness is understandable as he is on his way home after being released from a mental hospital where he received treatment for a mental breakdown. We learn that his breakdown occurred on the last flight he ventured to board, so we empathize with his struggle to remain calm as he nervously boards the airplane and takes his seat. Things get worse for Wilson after take-off when, during a threatening storm, he spots what appears to be a large gremlin on the wing of the plane. Soon, the gremlin seems to begin tampering with one of the engines. Undetected by every other passenger and crew member, the gremlin appears very real to Wilson. The internal conflict raging in Wilson is obvious; he can't believe what he sees, yet he really does seem to see it. He looks and looks again. He doesn't want to believe

it, yet, despite the darkness and the rain and regardless of how many times he looks and looks again, the gremlin truly seems to be there. The consequences here are serious, for if he is right and there is indeed a mischievous gremlin tampering with the engine, all of their lives are at stake. He knows how extremely unlikely it is that there is indeed a gremlin on the wing of the plane. In vain he attempts to share his conviction, but given the frailty of his mental health and the outrageousness of his claim, no one believes him. Finally, he takes matters into his own hands, and, it seems, saves the day.

This episode is one of my favorites in the *Twilight Zone* series for several reasons, including Shatner's signature performance, the unlikely look of the gremlin (you might think that a creature that appears to deny the laws of physics would be more streamlined), and the sheer implausibility of the story. However, I enjoy the episode most for its ability to confront the unsuspecting viewer with a significant philosophical and practical question. This question is, *What is truth?* "Nightmare" leads audience members on a voyage from doubt to belief and perhaps to the realm of knowledge. In what follows, I discuss Bertrand Russell's views on truth in order to trace Wilson's journey into the *Twilight Zone*, a journey that begins with perception and doubt, proceeds to belief, and perhaps ends in truth.

## TRUTH AND FALSITY

*Won't you even allow the possibility?*

*Robert Wilson to his wife in "Nightmare"*

Bertrand Russell once said that he would never die for his beliefs because he knew he might be wrong. In other words, despite the fact that one must believe in order to know, no matter how sincerely, intently, and strongly one believes something, it may be false. So, in considering the difference between knowledge and belief, between, for example, Wilson's belief that there is a gremlin on the wing of the plane and his knowing that there is a gremlin on the wing, one crucial element to consider is the whether the belief is true, for to know something, not only must you believe it, but it must also be true. This, in fact, is the way we distinguish belief from knowledge. Think of the many beliefs you've held in your life that have subsequently been exposed as false. Or think of the many beliefs past cultures have held that we now know were never true. A favorite example here is the belief at one time held by the greatest minds that the earth

was flat. Despite the fact that they had evidence supporting their belief and (almost) everyone agreed that it was true, we now know that they were mistaken. Thus, although they thought they knew something, they merely strongly maintained a false belief.

In a chapter of *Problems of Philosophy* called "Truth and Falsehood" Russell attempts to discern what it means to say that something is true. This quest to define truth must be clearly distinguished from attempts to determine which of our beliefs are true. Of course, understanding the meaning of truth does not entail believing all and only true claims any more than understanding the meaning of happiness entails acting in all and only ways conducive to one's happiness. Life is messy, after all, and having a sound theory does not guarantee flawless practice in any human endeavor. The truth or falsity of one's beliefs is independent of one's understanding of what truth is; most of us do not have a clear conception of truth and yet we have many true (and false) beliefs.

Russell argues that for any theory of truth to be at all satisfactory, it must accomplish three things. First, it must draw a clear distinction between truth and falsity such that these two terms are opposite. If a theory defines truth in such a way that falsity is not its opposite, then the meaning of truth, and for that matter, the meaning of falsity, become vacuous. Consider Wilson's belief that there is a gremlin on the wing of the plane. He is the only one who holds that belief on the flight, not even his wife shares it. She believes quite the opposite, namely, that it is not the case that there is a gremlin on the wing of the plane. So, it seems that if Wilson's belief is true, those who believe he is wrong must hold a false belief. Notice that whether he is correct is irrelevant, for the point holds in either case. If he is wrong, his belief is then false and, by definition, those who thought he was wrong hold a true belief.

Some theories of truth fail to meet this very basic requirement. One such theory, a rather popular one in some circles, we can call the "Personal Truth" view of truth. The Personal Truth theory of truth reduces truth to a matter of personal belief and seems to claim that if someone has a belief to which they resolutely subscribe, then in some sense that makes the belief true, at least for that individual. You may have heard people say things like: "Well, if he believes it, it is true *for him*" or "This is my truth, you don't have to believe it" or "I believe it and that is good enough for me." These sentiments disclose the workings of the Personal Truth view of truth in the mindset of the person who asserts them. But what do these claims actually amount to? If Wilson's Personal Truth is that there is gremlin on the wing of the plane and his wife's Personal

Truth is that her husband is mistaken in his belief that there is a gremlin on the wing of the plane, then, as we saw above, only one of them is correct. The Personal Truth view of truth is actually just a complicated and convoluted way of talking about beliefs. Belief is not the same as truth, however, and we can easily amass countless examples to illustrate this point.

### TRUTH AND BELIEF

*I didn't tell you before because I wasn't sure if it was real or not, but I am sure now. It is real. There's a man out there or a gremlin, whatever it is. If I described him to you, you'd really think I was gone.*

*Robert Wilson to his wife in "Nightmare"*

In order to distinguish between truth and falsity, it is essential that we distinguish between truth and belief, for very frequently our strongly held beliefs turn out to be false. Yet, although belief is not sufficient for truth, it, or something like it, seems to be necessary. The second qualification that Russell insists on for any adequate theory of truth is that the theory must make truth a property of beliefs or propositions. Beliefs, statements, and propositions are things that can be true or false. For example, the following are candidates for truth and falsity:

- There is a large furry gremlin on the wing of the plane.
- It is not the case that there is a gremlin on the wing of the plane.
- Robert Wilson is hallucinating.
- It is not the case that Robert Wilson is hallucinating.
- Robert Wilson is married.
- Robert Wilson is a human being.

Contrast the above statements with the following, which are not candidates for truth and falsity:

- A large furry gremlin
- A wing of an airplane
- Robert Wilson and a gremlin
- Robert Wilson
- A threatening storm
- Julia Wilson

This second group of examples is a list of things that may or may not exist, but as they exist they are not true (or false). "A large furry gremlin" is neither true nor false, but it is either true or false that "There is a large furry gremlin on the wing of the plane." The matter, that is, the stuff of the world, exists as it does and in a manner entirely independent of truth and falsity. It takes a mind with ideas and attitudes to accurately or inaccurately apprehend the stuff of the world. Without minds, and thus without thoughts, ideas, beliefs, and so on, there would be no such thing as truth and falsity. In our quest to understand the world we inhabit, truth, and even more frequently, falsehood, are born. Russell sums this up when he says: "If there were no beliefs, there could be no falsehood, and no truth either. . . . If we imagine a world of mere matter, there would be no room for falsehood in such a world. . . . Truths and falsehoods are properties of beliefs and statements" (*Problems of Philosophy*, pp. 120–1).

So, the world as it is in itself is neither true nor false, it just is; rather, our understanding of the nature of the world is correct or incorrect. Your beliefs are true or false, the objects of your beliefs just are what they are. Think of it this way: the gremlin tampering with the plane is not true or false, but Wilson's belief that the gremlin is tampering with the plane is true or false. The gremlin is not true; rather, it is true *that the gremlin is on the wing of the plane*. The gremlin is not dependent upon a mind for its existence, however, the truth about the gremlin can be considered only by a mind able to entertain beliefs and ideas. It is in this way, but importantly not in every way, that truth is mind dependent, that is, truth depends upon a human mind.

### TRUTH AND CORRESPONDENCE

ROBERT WILSON: *It's all right now, darling.*

JULIA WILSON: *I know, but I am the only one who does know . . . right now.*

*Exchange between Robert Wilson and his wife at the end of "Nightmare at 20,000 feet"*

The final qualification for a theory of truth that Russell presents is that it must recognize that the property of truth that is attributed necessarily to beliefs or statements is conditional on something independent of the belief itself. If Wilson's belief is true, it is true not because he believes it not because he believes it strongly, and not because he believes it despite

wishing it were false. Instead, it is true because of some relationship the belief has with something outside itself. What that something else is posited to be is a distinguishing mark between various theories of truth. For example, some hold the relationship maintains between the belief and facts, while some hold that the key relationship is found between the belief and other beliefs, and there are other contenders as well.

Russell argues that the meaning of truth is found in a correspondence between a belief and a fact. That is, what it means to say that Robert Wilson's belief that there is a gremlin tampering with the wing of the plane is true is that his belief corresponds to a fact of the matter: that indeed there is gremlin tampering with the wing of the plane. This sounds straightforward enough; the correspondence theory tells us what might have seemed obvious to us. It tells us that:

"There is a gremlin tampering with the wing of the plane" is true *if and only if* it is a fact that there is a gremlin tampering with the wing of the plane.

The correspondence theory of truth seems commonsensical; a given claim is true provided that it corresponds to the facts. However, there are problems with the theory. To see the major reason why many find the theory unsatisfying, we should remind ourselves of the role that truth plays in our attempts to know the world. We believe that knowing something entails its being true. Wilson knows that the gremlin is there if and only if the gremlin is there. If he is hallucinating, then regardless of how strongly he believes it, his belief is false and his claim to knowledge fails. Obviously, we want to know things, so we want to apprehend the facts of the matter. We are motivated by a desire to have knowledge of all sorts of matters, from the trivial to the profound. One of the more ubiquitous desires we have is to know *that we know* something. We may find ourselves absolutely reveling in the knowledge that we know something is the case, especially when others disagree. It is one thing to know some truth or another, knowing that we know that truth can be the source of even greater satisfaction.

Wilson's case is drastic because he is aware that someone has to do something if his belief is true. Someone has to stop the gremlin or the plane will crash due to engine failure as a result of the gremlin's tampering. Thus, he has a belief and he believes that it is true and while Russell's theory tells him that it is true if it corresponds to reality, the correspondence theory gives him no way to tell whether it is true. The belief is true if and only if it corresponds to reality. But how can we know *that*?

He knows it if his belief corresponds to a fact, but the correspondence theory offers no way of determining whether his belief does correspond to a fact. As Russell explains: "if truth consists in a correspondence of thought with something outside thought, thought can never know when truth as been attained" (*Problems of Philosophy*, p. 121). Help, in the form of a test for truth, can be found in another theory of truth: the coherence theory.

## TRUTH AND COHERENCE

*I'm not imagining it. I am not imagining it. He's out there. – Don't look. He's not there now. He, he jumps away whenever anyone might see him, except me. Honey, he's there. I realize what this sounds like. Do I look insane? . . . I know I had a mental breakdown and I know I had it in an airplane. I know it looks to you as if the same thing is happening again, but it isn't. I'm sure it isn't.*

*Robert Wilson to his wife in "Nightmare"*

Over the course of "Nightmare at 20,000 Feet," Robert Wilson grows increasingly confident that there is a gremlin tampering with the engine on the wing of the plane. At first, he can't seem to believe it, but time and again, he sees it. Eventually his confidence is high enough that he tries to warn the others, but no one believes him. Of course, they won't believe him; his claim is wildly implausible, he is visibly agitated, and some know his history and thus have the reasonable suspicion that he may be mentally unstable. Under the circumstances, who would believe him? To make matters worse, when he does succeed in getting someone else to entertain the remote possibility that he is correct, whenever that person looks out the window to investigate whether there is someone or something on the wing of the plane, the gremlin disappears, floating upward to avoid detection. The gremlin, it turns out, is considerably more mischievous than he first appeared. Wilson realizes this and realizes that he will have to take matters into his own hands. With the intensity of a mar confident in his convictions, he quickly conceives a plan. For her safety and so she doesn't try to stop him, Wilson sends his wife Julia for a glass of water. He then acts very quickly and purposefully, stealing the air marshal's gun, breaking open the emergency window, and, heroically, while hanging precariously out the window of the plane, he shoots and kills the dangerous gremlin.

The coherence theory of truth defines truth in a way similar to the correspondence theory, with two very significant differences. On the coherence theory of truth, a belief is true just in case it coheres with the set of beliefs that we believe to be true. Thus, both the correspondence and the coherence theories insist that truth has its opposite in falsehood, that truth is a property of beliefs, and that the property of truth is attributable to a belief in virtue of a relationship between that belief and something else. The difference between the two theories can be seen in the nature of the relationship involved, coherence versus correspondence, and the objects that are related, beliefs and facts versus beliefs and beliefs. The coherence theory of truth maintains that the meaning of truth is found in coherence between a belief and other beliefs. F. H. Bradley, a proponent of the coherence theory of truth explains that his "object is to have a world as comprehensive and coherent as possible" (*Essays on Truth and Reality*, p. 210). In other words, Wilson's belief that there is a gremlin on the wing of the plane is true, according to the coherence theory of truth, if and only if that belief is consistent with the set of beliefs that we take to be true; if and only if, that is, it helps round out the system of our beliefs about the world. Bradley recommends accepting claims as true only "because and as far as, while taking them as real, I am better able to deal with the incoming new 'facts' and in general to make my world wider and more harmonious" (*Essays on Truth and Reality*, p. 211).

Russell argues against the coherence theory as an adequate definition of truth. He finds it lacking as a theory because there may be more than one set of coherent beliefs which contradict one another, but are wholly consistent as sets in themselves. Russell uses the example of an imaginative novelist to explain this problem: "With sufficient imagination, a novelist might invent a past for the world that would perfectly fit on to what we know, and yet be quite different from our real past. In more scientific matters, it is certain that there are often two or more hypotheses which account for all the known facts on some subject" (*Problems of Philosophy*, p. 122). So truth cannot, according to Russell, be defined by the notion of coherence. He insists that correspondence remains the best definition of the meaning of truth, even though the correspondence theory of truth fails to give us any test for truth. The coherence theory fails where the correspondence theory succeeds, for it does not offer an acceptable meaning for truth. However, the coherence theory also succeeds where the correspondence theory fails by giving us a good test for truth. Thus, the best overall theory of truth may be found by merging the

correspondence and the coherence theories and using correspondence as a definition with coherence as the test.

### DEFINING AND TESTING FOR TRUTH: CORRESPONDENCE AND COHERENCE

*The flight of Mr. Robert Wilson has ended now. A flight not only from point A to point B, but also from the fear of recurring mental breakdown. Mr. Wilson has that fear no longer, though for the moment he is as he has said, alone in this assurance. Happily, his conviction will not remain isolated too much longer, for happily, tangible manifestation is often left as evidence of trespass, even from so intangible a quarter as The Twilight Zone.*

*Voice-over ending of "Nightmare at 20,000 Feet"*

The situation on the flight of Robert Wilson is quite problematic, for while he is sure that there is a gremlin tampering with the plane, others are sure that if he is seeing anything at all, it is a result of his mental anxiety and instability coupled with the torrential storm they are flying through and he is not seeing a gremlin because there is *not* a gremlin on the wing of the plane. The two different interpretations can't be simultaneously true. Either the gremlin is there or isn't. There seems to be some agreement on the fact that Wilson believes that he sees a gremlin, the question is whether he believes it because there is a gremlin or because he is hallucinating that there is a gremlin; that is, the question is whether what he believes to be true is true. The correspondence theory tells us that his belief is true if it corresponds to the facts of the matter, yet it gives us no way to access those facts.

The gremlin and the hallucination stories are each seemingly consistent with the evidence. Although both stories (of the gremlin and of the storm plus Wilson's mental instability creating a gremlin appearance) are consistent with the evidence, one seems more plausible for its fit with the rest of what we believe to be true. We have certain beliefs about physics, gravity, and so on that seem to rule out the possibility that there is a gremlin on the wing of the plane. Wilson is in the uncomfortable position of believing something that does not seem to cohere with the set of beliefs most people on the plane hold as true. The other passengers, and Wilson as well, have the following beliefs: This plane is flying at an approximate elevation of 20,000 feet. This plane is flying at least as fast as 150 miles per hour. The claim that there is a person or person-like creature

tampering with the wing of the plane just doesn't fit. In other words, it doesn't cohere with other beliefs we know to be true; it seems to contradict them. Initially at least, the hallucination story has the added benefit of not contradicting the set of beliefs we generally take to be true.

The episode ends with Wilson on a stretcher after being carried off the plane, which appears to have landed safely on the ground. In the background we see evidence of the gremlin's tampering and the voice-over assures us that this evidence will lead others to come to believe that Wilson was indeed correct. But the correspondence theory can only tell us that Wilson was correct provided that he was correct, i.e. his belief was true if it corresponds to a fact of the matter. However, what we want to know is if he was correct! The coherence theory of truth offers us a method of discerning truth from falsity. No claim is taken as infallible and each claim is tested for the extent to which it coheres with the rest of our beliefs. Although a belief may look on first pass to contradict our system of beliefs, we may learn, on closer inspection, that it fits. This may be due to the unearthing of some new evidence and/or to learning that some of our previously held beliefs were actually mistakenly assumed to be true. For example, the evidence of trespass left by the gremlin will introduce new beliefs into our system and we may find room to fit the possibility that Robert Wilson was correct into our system of the world.

Robert Wilson was right that there was in fact a gremlin tampering with the wing of the plan if and only if there was. This we learn from the correspondence theory of truth. However, what the correspondence theory is completely silent about is whether Robert Wilson was in fact correct. In order to gain some insight into that issue we will need to utilize the test of truth articulated by the coherence theory of truth. We test his claims for the extent to which they cohere with all of the other claims and evidence we can amass. Although his story was outlandish, there is evidence to suggest it was true, for, indeed, "happily, tangible manifestation is often left as evidence of trespass, even from so intangible a quarter as *The Twilight Zone*" ("Nightmare at 20,000 Feet").

#### SOURCES

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## IO

### RATIONALITY AND CHOICE IN "NICK OF TIME"

AEON J. SKOBLE

The *Twilight Zone* episode "Nick of Time" is a fascinating psychological thriller, a case study in choice making, rationality, and irrationality. It is a compelling and eerie drama, as we expect *Twilight Zone* episodes to be, but it is unusual also: it does not use the famous "twist" ending which is the hallmark of so many classic episodes, and it also does not depend in any way on the reality of supernatural forces. When we think of the greatest episodes, we typically think of one of these two devices: Henry Bemis breaks his glasses, "To Serve Man" is a cookbook, Nan Adams is already dead, Talky Tina really talks. "Nick of Time," by contrast, on close examination is actually entirely realistic, yet the viewer is nevertheless propelled into the *Twilight Zone*.<sup>1</sup>

A young married couple on a honeymoon drive, Don and Pat Carter (William Shatner and Patricia Breslin), have car trouble near Ridgeview, Ohio. While waiting for their car to be repaired, they decide to pass the time in a diner, and start playing with a novelty fortune-telling machine. The fortune-telling machine has a little devil's head bobbling on top, so it looks mildly sinister or mysterious. They insert a penny, ask a yes/no question, and receive answers which are extremely vague, yet which