coherence conception of truth as ideal or absolute justification of our beliefs actually presupposes the concept of truth.

Now, although coherentism has often been associated in the history of philosophy with the high-flown metaphysical doctrines of absolute idealism or monism, there is no necessity in this. And there does seem to be an intuition at the root of the doctrine that is worth spelling out: that a given belief is true only if it can be *justified*, or *warranted* in a certain way, and that truth has an essential connection to *knowledge*. The coherentist takes this justification to be tied not only to individual beliefs, but to systems of beliefs, hence holds the view that knowledge is also a matter of coherence. But here again, it is not necessary, and there will be coherentist as well as non-coherentist versions of *epistemic* theories of truth.

1.4 Verificationism

An epistemic theory of truth is one that essentially ties truth to our epistemic justification for beliefs: truth is a matter of whether a belief is justified, warranted, rational, acceptable, and so on. Roughly, the schema here is:

(Epistemic theory)   X *is true iff* X *satisfies some epistemic condition*

In this sense a definition of truth for such theories is inseparable from a *criterion* of truth. But it need not straightforwardly assimilate truth to justification. For one might have a criterion of truth without this criterion being a definition of truth itself. Thus the catalogue of a library gives us a criterion for the presence or the absence of a book in the library, but what we mean when we say that the book is in the library is not that the book is in the catalogue.[22] Or take Descartes's view. His criterion for truth is self-evidence or the clarity and distinctiveness of our ideas, but his official definition of truth is the adequacy of ideas with respect to things. Another reason why truth does not simply amount to justification is that justification is context-relative and defeasible: one can have a justification for *p* at *t* and in circumstances *c*, but cease to be justified at *t′* and in *c′*. The justification must be in some sense stable and undefeasible.

We have seen that coherentism, in so far as it defines truth as the coherence of a set of beliefs constrained by an epistemic condition, qualifies as an epistemic theory of truth. But the most common kind of epistemic theory of truth is *verificationism*: it identifies the truth of a statement with its verifiability:

(Verificationism)   X *is true iff* X *is verifiable*

This should not be confused with a verificationist theory of *meaning*. The latter says that the meaning of a statement or sentence is the method by which we verify it. The possession of a method – for instance, checking one's memories – for establishing the meaning of a certain sentence about the past need not imply that such sentences are true when so verified. But there is a link between the first and the second, for when the method is conclusive and reliable – if memory were so reliable, for instance, by giving us direct acquaintance with past events – the method of verification warrants the truth of the statement. The link appears better in the other direction: if one equates the meaning of a sentence with its *truth conditions*, and if the truth conditions are the verification conditions, then one can move from a verificationist conception of truth to a verificationist conception of meaning.[23]

The logical positivists tried to defend such verificationist conceptions of meaning and of truth in the 1930s, on the basis of an empiricist epistemology according to which the meaning of a statement and its truth could be ascertained from its connections to experiences. On this basis they drew a distinction between those statements that are true on the basis of our verifications by sense experience (synthetic) and those that are true purely in virtue of meaning and linguistic conventions alone (analytic truths). Notoriously, these accounts failed because of their reductionist character: the task of isolating purely empiricist criteria for the meaningfulness and truth of our beliefs is hopeless. As a number of critics of this empiricist conception, including logical positivists such as Hempel or Neurath, and in particular Quine, have shown, the meaning of an individual isolated statement or belief, and hence its truth (if the truth of a statement depends upon what we take it to mean) cannot be ascertained independently from a background of other statements, and thus cannot be reduced to basic empirical tests. Here we

stumble again on a feature upon which the coherentist conception of truth insisted: the *holism* or the necessarily network-connected character of our beliefs. In the philosophy of science, the problem for a verificationist conception of the truth of scientific theories is familiar: rival and incompatible theories can predict exactly the same empirical consequences. Theories are underdetermined by the possible evidence. This leads to the view, known as the Duhem–Quine thesis, that only whole theories meet experience, and not isolated beliefs, and that appropriate adjustments can always be made to make them fit the data. But then this coherence theory of knowledge will again stumble upon the difficulty that affects the coherence theory of truth, that one can always enlarge, or modify, our coherent sets of beliefs to adapt them to reality.

But perhaps we can save the basic insights of the verificationist conception of meaning and truth without endorsing its most reductionist and coherentist consequences. This is what philosophers like Dummett (1978, 1991) have tried to show. Dummett's programme aims at giving us a new framework for thinking about the issues that traditionally oppose, in philosophy, realism and anti-realism. He claims that these issues do not concern so much the kind of entities that we can consider as "real" or not, but the kind of *conception of truth* that underlies our commitments. Realism and anti-realism are thus primarily *semantic* theses. Dummett starts from a reflection on the meaning and the truth of mathematical statements. The view known as Platonism in the philosophy of mathematics says that they are true in virtue of some independent reality, which will exist whether we are able to recognize it or not. So Platonism not only embodies a "realist" conception of truth, but also a realist conception of meaning, according to which the meaning of mathematical statements "transcends" their possible verification. The opposite view, constructivism, says that they do not transcend this verification, and equates truth with proof or demonstration. For it, the meaning of a statement will be given by its *assertibility* (or proof) conditions.

Dummett's conception can be thought of as an attempt to extend this opposition from the mathematical case to the case of the meaning of other sorts of statements than mathematical ones, hence to provide a theory of meaning for whole languages that would be based on constructivistic assumptions. But if so, it would

presuppose a certain conception of truth and meaning instead of being an attempt to *show*, on independent grounds, that such a conception is correct. So his considered view is rather that a verificationist theory of truth can be established on the basis of a verificationist theory of meaning. To defend the latter, he argues that a language could not be learnt, nor the meanings of its sentences be made manifest to others, if one could not associate with them specifiable assertion-conditions, or, to take up Wittgenstein's slogan that "meaning is use", use-conditions. He claims that we have no conception of what various "recognition-transcendent" sentences, about the past, about counterfactual circumstances, or about remote regions of space and time could be, although we understand such sentences, hence that what we mean by such sentences cannot be their "realistic" truth conditions. He is thus led to propose an "anti-realist" semantics in terms of assertibility conditions, which is a version of the verificationist view:

(Warranted assertibility)   X *is true iff* X *is warrantedly assertible*

As Dummett puts it in "Truth",

> We no longer explain the sense of a statement by stipulating its truth-value in terms of the truth-values of its constituents, but by stipulating when it may be asserted in terms of the conditions under which its constituents may be asserted.
>
> ([1959] 1978: 17–18)

But such an epistemic, or verificationist, theory of meaning will not leave untouched our ordinary conception of truth. This can be seen for the simple case of negation. In classical logic, "it is not true that *p*" and "not-*p*" have the same meaning. But if truth is warranted assertibility, "*p*" means "It is assertible that *p*', and "not-*p*" means "It is not assertible that *p*". But "It is not assertible that *p*" is not equivalent to "It is assertible that not-*p*" (for instance, that we have no evidence that the Loch Ness monster exists does not mean that we have evidence that it does not exist). At some point, such an anti-realist semantics will have to reject (or to suspend belief in) the classical principle of *bivalence*, that every statement is either true or false, *tertium non datur*.

So it seems that a radically epistemic conception of meaning will do more than give a definition of truth in terms of epistemic access, but also that it will revise our ordinary concept of it. Such a conception embodies two problematic assumptions. The first is that one could give verification conditions one by one, for each kind of sentences. In the light of the holistic character of verification, this is dubious. The second is that a verificationist theory of meaning leads to a verificationist theory of truth: truth *is* warranted assertibility. But warranted assertibility is not truth, for this goes against our best realistic intuitions: it seems perfectly possible to have all the best justifications for the truth of a statement, although this statement might be false. What is true may not coincide with what is *known* to be true. Now could we suppose that we can reach a stage where a statement, or a set of statements, are such that they can completely be justified in an *ideal* situation? We have already seen that this idealization move is characteristic of the coherence theory of truth. But we have also seen that when it is supposed to imply that we reach the standpoint of an omniscient being or an absolute conception of reality, this conception is dubiously an anti-realist or epistemic conception of truth. So the ideal state is better constructed as that of an ideal knower, who would, in relevant respects, be like *us*, but who would, also in relevant respects, be unlike us. Putnam (1983), after Peirce, has once proposed such a view of truth as "idealized rational acceptability" (or warranted assertibility): a belief is true if and only if it would be justifiable in a situation where all the relevant evidence were available.

(Ideal Warranted Assertibility)   X *is true iff* X *would be warrantedly assertible (believed) in ideal conditions*

There are a number of objections to such a view. The most obvious is that we have no idea of what these epistemically ideal circumstances and of what the "relevant evidence" might be, and that we do not see how such beliefs could be justified if they were not *true*. This view also leads to paradoxical consequences, which have been made manifest by Frederic Fitch (1963) and Alvin Plantinga (1982).[24] Fitch's argument is the "paradox of knowability":

> *The paradox of knowability*. (a) If something is true, then it is at least knowable, even if it is, *de facto*, unknown. (b) Moreover it is possible that there are truths that are unknown and will never be known (*i.e* unknowable truths).(c) But if something is an unknowable truth, then it is possible for it to be known (by (a)). So (d) if something is known to be an unknowable truth, then it is known to be a truth; but if it is known to be an unknowable truth then it *is* an unknowable truth, and hence it is not known. So it is impossible that there could be a truth that will never be known, and if there is an unknowable truth, it will never be known to be such.

How does that bear on ideal verificationism? Substitute in the previous argument "believed to be true in ideal circumstances" for "true". It follows that if something cannot be believed under ideal circumstances, it can never be believed that it is so in the ideal circumstances. So the biconditional expressing ideal warranted assertibility above fails to be true when "*X*" is "*X* cannot be believed under ideal circumstances". I shall not detail Plantinga's argument, which attacks the claim, made by the ideal verificationist, that truth cannot outrun possible justification. It shows that it does not have the resources to assert that the circumstances are not ideal: it is a necessary truth that the circumstances are ideal.

Such difficulties have led Putnam to renounce the thesis that truth could be defined as ideal justification, and to retreat to the view that they are interdependent. So, as with metaphysical coherentism, the definition actually presupposes the notion of truth (Putnam 1990: 115).

1.5 Pragmatism

Prima facie, the so-called pragmatist conceptions of truth do not belong to the same family as those that we have examined so far, for they are generally taken to define truth in terms of a different sort of relation from correspondence or coherence, which, moreover, does not seem to be epistemic: they define the truth of a belief in terms of its utility or of its beneficial consequences for action:

(Pragmatist theory)   X *is true iff* X *is useful*

No historical pragmatist, however, expressed this view in this crude form. James is sometimes close to it when he says that:

> "The true" . . . is only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as 'the right' is the expedient in the way of our behaving", and that "the true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief and good, too, for definite assignable reasons"   (James 1907: 106; 1909: 42).

Peirce disclaimed strongly that he had defended a doctrine about truth similar to James's. His own "pragmatic maxim" was not aimed at a definition of truth, but a complex methodological rule: "Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object" (Peirce 1935–58, vol. V: 402). If we set aside the actual pragmatists' views, the crude pragmatist "definition" above is open to evident objections, which have been voiced by Russell in his criticism of James.[25] There are many beliefs that are useful, but false, and vice versa. Moreover the doctrine has an air of subjectivism or relativism: what is useful for X might not be useful for Y, and at least depends upon our desires and goals, which are not obviously reduced to a single one, and on the circumstances. Worse, as Russell remarks, pragmatism, so understood, completely misrepresents the concept of knowledge: to know that p is to know that p is true, not to know that p is useful. Just as Mill complained about purely hedonistic interpretations of utilitarianism, James bitterly complained against narrow interpretations of his views. He protested that he did not want to defend the philistine view that the truth of a belief is its mere "cash value" or the fact that "it pays", but that he wanted to locate the meaning and importance of truth in our intellectual life, and to attract attention to how much purely intellectual ideals (the "disinterested search for truth") are connected to practical ideals, to emotional life and to action in general. But then it becomes unclear that pragmatism offers a definition of truth at all, instead of reflections on the *point* of a notion of truth. At best, utility is a *criterion* of truth, and Russell here was right to suspect that James might have confused it with a definition. Pragmatism in general is better construed as a certain conception of *belief* rather than as a distinctive conception of truth.

Peirce bases pragmatism (which he preferred to call "pragmaticism" to avoid the philistine implications), upon the thesis that belief is a *disposition to act*. To believe that *p* is to be disposed to act in certain ways, or to acquire certain habits of mind. This might, provided appropriate ways of fixing the desires of agents and their kinds of behaviour, give a definition of beliefs, but it can hardly give us a definition of their truth, for this definition presupposes that, for an action to be the successful realization of our desires (and provided we can know their contents), the beliefs in question have to be *true*. For instance the reason why it is useful for me to believe that I am sitting on a chair is that, on the face of my perceptions, I feel at this moment that I am sitting on it. This is certainly a useful belief, since if I did not have it, I would not be able to sit and write, which are for the moment useful actions. But the truth *that I am now sitting* is not for that constituted by the utility of these actions. Rather it is *because* the belief is true that the actions are useful. In fact my utility is exactly a function of my capacity to react to an objective world upon which my beliefs inform me, and not the other way round.

The interesting doctrine in pragmatism, which was developed by Ramsey, who considered himself to be Peirce's disciple, is not one about truth, but one about the *meanings* of our beliefs: their meaning, or their truth conditions, are their *utility conditions*, the way in which they *generally* (although they might not in particular circumstances) lead to successful actions in the long run. This is called, in contemporary philosophy, a "success semantics" for beliefs,[26] and there is a biological evolutionist version of it: on a large scale those of our beliefs that are true are those that tend to be beneficial for our species (this is called "teleosemantics"[27]). That can provide us with a realistic conception of meaning and representation (which can be considered as an appropriate alternative to Dummett's anti-realist conception considered above), but it does not define truth in biological and functional terms. Rather the biologically reductive story employs a realistic and correspondentist definition of truth as the property (useful by all means) to represent the environment.

Peirce himself was an evolutionist, but his pragmatism had a more idealist twist. His own view of truth is, as I have already noted, best understood as a form of ideal coherentism or ideal verificationism:

our beliefs are true when they are held "at the limit of scientific enquiry" by a community of researchers.[28] At this limit, the beliefs will have achieved their maximum utility, but it is an intellectual utility, for a kind of action that is scientific action. This is a combination of the ideal warranted assertibility view and of the pragmatist "definition". But it does not say that the ideal condition follows from the pragmatist definition. Rather, it says that the latter would follow from the former. Once we have reached the ideal limit, it cannot but prove useful for knowledge (and so it is a special kind of *epistemic* utility which is aimed at). It is also essential for Peirce that the progress of scientific enquiry oriented towards this ideal limit be a process of *revision* and criticism of our beliefs. We might, within this process, as James insisted in his famous paper "The Will to Believe" (1897), accept certain views for which we temporarily do not have sufficient evidence for their truth, but that we find useful for later stages of the enquiry (we shall come back to this doctrine below, §4.5). But these beliefs cannot be assessed for other reasons than the fact that we take them as true. And at the end of scientific enquiry, the overall coherent set of our beliefs will just be *true*. But we have already seen the difficulties that such a view encounters.

The foregoing indicates that there are many varieties of pragmatism: some, when they amount to a form of coherentism, are closer to idealism and epistemic theories of truth; others, when they include a conception of an ideal correspondence to reality and a realistic view of truth conditions, are closer to realism; and some others, as we shall see, flirt with relativism. We shall meet again the ideal limit conception. But for the moment, we can conclude that pragmatism is at best a fairly unstable conception of truth.[29]

1.6 The identity theory

At several stages we have met the view that truth might not be a relation between our thoughts and reality or between thoughts and facts, but a relation of *identity* between them. As we have seen, this is one way of reading Aristotle's famous dictum in *Metaphysics* (Γ 1011b, 26). It might also underlie some medieval views, as when Anselm of Canterbury identified truth with God (*De Veritate*: 151–74). As we saw, Frege contemplated an identity theory of truth in the course of his argument against correspondence, and Russell

tended to assimilate true propositions with facts. We have formulated above the identity theory of facts. Identity would be a limiting case of correspondence. But it might also be a limiting case of coherence too, when the whole integrated set of our thoughts *is* the Absolute or Being. There is a more general definition, which might accommodate this compatibility with a correspondence as well as a coherence conception:

(Identity theory of truth)   X *is true iff* X *is identical to reality*

Such a view is sometimes called an *identity* theory of truth. Although it captures a long-standing intuition, and was present from the very beginnings of analytic philosophy, the identity theory of truth has received attention only recently, and it is a relative newcomer in these discussions.[30] It has an air of Eleatic, deep-sounding doctrine. But is it clear that it makes sense and that it forms a distinctive conception of truth that might be added to the preceding list?

The identity theory hardly makes sense when truth-bearers are taken to be sentences. How can a mere series of sounds or symbols be identical with a piece of reality? The same implausibility affects the view that the truth-bearers are mental entities, for their identification to reality sounds like Berkeleyan idealism (*esse est percipi*). The only way to construe them meaningfully is to say that the *contents* of thoughts is the appropriate candidate for the identification.[31] Moore, in his early period, defended such a view against a correspondence theory:

> So far, indeed, from truth being defined by reference to reality, reality can only be defined by reference to truth: for truth denotes exactly the property of the complex formed by two entities and their relation, in virtue of which, if the entity predicated the existence, we call the complex real – the property, namely, expressed by saying that the relation in question does truly or really hold between the entities.   (Moore 1901: 21)

Moore holds that reality consists in true *propositions*, and in the concepts of which they are made of, that is of the complexes and the properties that true thoughts *are identical to*. But this can be read as

much as a statement of extreme realism as it can be read as a statement of extreme idealism.[32] If one remembers our above discussion of the notion of fact, the steps of this dialectic can be followed easily. We start by asking: to what can true thoughts be identified? To particular facts? If we do not want to countenance negative facts, we shall have to say that the identity holds only for true thoughts. But then the identity theory of truth comes close to a truism: a thought that *p* is true when *it is a fact* that *p*, or when the fact that *p* holds. In this truistic sense, the identity theory is hardly a substantive view. It looks very similar to what we shall call in the next chapter a deflationist conception of truth.[33] Now, when the facts are not appropriately individuated, we have to say that all true thoughts are identical with one Fact, the Big Fact of Reality itself. The identity, or equivalence constitutive of an identity theory of truth – a true thought *is* a fact, or a true thought is identical to reality – can be read in two ways, as in Moore's formulation. From right to left, this nudges thought into reality. From left to right, this nudges fact or reality into thought. The former is the identity theory of facts. The latter sounds like Absolute idealism. In this sense Spinoza or Hegel might be identity theorists of truth: Nature or Substance is One, seen from two aspects, Thought and Extension, or the Real and the Rational coincide. In the sense in which Russell (1914) called "mysticism" the belief in the essential unity of reality and thought, or monism, the Identity theory of truth embodies a form of mysticism. The idea that thought and reality are identical when truth holds may be the last word about it, but as Bradley says, this deep intuition cannot be spelled out:

> I must venture to doubt whether . . . truth, if that stands for the work of the intellect, is ever precisely identical with fact . . . Such an idea might be senseless, such a thought might contradict itself, but it serves to give voice to an appropriate instinct.
> (Bradley 1922: 49–50).

In so far as it is a substantive view of truth, it seems that the identity theory is ineffable.

We have now reviewed the main substantive conceptions of truth present on the philosophical scene. The upshot of our discussion

seems to be the following. In their attempts to give general and comprehensive definitions of truth, philosophers have not achieved much: either they have provided "theories" that fly in the face of obvious facts (justification is not truth, coherence is not enough, utility is not truth either), or they have not been able to go farther than mere platitudes (a thought is true when it tells us the way the world is). Every attempt to go further than such truisms either seems to beg the question (to presuppose the notion of truth) or to commit us to dubious metaphysical assumptions. Moreover, most of the theories that we have examined so far are unstable: it is very hard for each definition to be kept pure, for correspondence truth is difficult to defend without adding epistemic elements in it, and epistemic and coherence truth are hard to maintain without relying on some concept of correspondence, such as truth as utility, or truth as identity. This does not necessarily toll the death knell for a substantive and informative real definition of the *essence* of truth, for one might argue that such a definition does not have to agree with our most common *concept* of truth. After all a theory of X may reveal features that do not harmonize with our current notion of X. H_2O does not sound like "water", thoughts and feelings do not look like products of neuronal activity. But at least what one expects from a real sophisticated and possibly unintuitive definition is that it explains, like H_2O, the ordinary features of the *definiens*. But none of the definitions that we have considered does this. So perhaps Frege was right: truth is an indefinable property. It might even not be a *property* of anything at all. So it is time to explore option 2 in Figure 1.