

The critique of language*

Fritz Mauthner†

TRANSLATED BY *Christian Romuss*‡

‘[S]keptical resignation, insight into the unknowability of the world of reality, is no mere negation, is our best knowledge; philosophy is epistemology, epistemology is critique of language; to critique language, however, is to work on the liberating thought that, with the words of their languages and with the expressions of their philosophies, men can never get beyond a figurative depiction of the world.’¹

Eternal truths

Schiller’s beautiful sentences are not the only things called ‘eternal truths’ in the language of our school essays. In philosophy too, for millennia, axioms have been readily called eternal truths, and even the personification of truth itself is occasionally given the epithet *eternal, timeless*, although such epithets pertain to people least of all. Fervent is the thought which imagines the Christian God to be the *summa veritas*, expressed by Augustine in a sentence which recalls

* The following extracts are entries from Fritz Mauthner’s *Wörterbuch der Philosophie. Neue Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache* (Munich: Georg Müller, 1910/11). This work, *Dictionary of Philosophy: New Contributions to a Critique of Language*, is in the public domain in the original German and available on archive.org. It remains untranslated into English.

† Fritz Mauthner (1849-1923) was a Bohemian Jewish journalist, writer and philosopher. His best-known works are *Contributions to a Critique of Language* (1901-2), *Dictionary of Philosophy* (1910-11) and *Atheism and its History in the West* (1920-23). He lived in Berlin, Freiburg, and Meersburg, Germany.

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Synkrētīc

Schiller: ‘*Erit [igitur] veritas, etiamsi mundus intereat.*’² Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant speak, more or less critically, of eternal truths. But even in our own day, when the concept of truth has been psychologically investigated and recognised as a relative concept, when pragmatism on one side and Nietzsche on the other have introduced into philosophy Goethe’s simple idea—namely, that what is biologically useful is called true—the talk of eternal truths does not cease; the logicians in particular happily recite the logical tautology that the truth of a judgment has no relation to time, is supratemporal, therefore eternal.

We will yet learn that *truth* and *belief* are not at all so very different from each other as the common language of our scholars believes or deems true.³ Now, whoever finds himself incapable of teaching that a belief has eternal duration, that it is not historically formed and reformed, ought also to refrain from speaking of eternal truths. Truth is nowhere in the world except in human heads, and there too it is nothing more than a particular attentiveness, an affirmation of judgments and prejudgments which, even without this attentiveness or affirmation, have been deemed true. This applies to the most banal of *eternal* truths (‘offences must be punished’) up to the highest principle of the new worldview (‘energy is constant’). Truths are not in reality, are only in human heads (Descartes: ‘*Aeternae veritates nullam existentiam extra cogitationem nostram habent.*’⁴), are strictly speaking only in human language, which is formed and reformed from people to people, from generation to generation. Eternal truths can therefore as little exist as there exists somewhere an eternal language. Even the proposition of the conservation or constancy of energy will not (in this form) eternally endure; and I do not mean the form of its words, but the form of its concepts.

God

Part I

It is often said: ‘If God did not exist, we would have to invent Him.’⁵ Would have to? We should say: would do well to. For the