

The Nature of Truth

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Objectives

After reading this chapter, students should be able to:

1. Explain the philosophical problem concerning truth;
2. Identify and explain different theories of truth; and
3. Discuss various problems raised against those theories.

Introduction

We give much importance to truth; some demand to know it, some fear it, and others would even die for it. But what exactly is truth? What is its nature? Does it even have a nature in the first place? When do we say that some truth-bearer¹ is true? Philosophers offer varying answers to these questions. In this chapter, we explore some of these answers and present some problems raised against them.

Does truth have a nature?

One fundamental philosophical question about truth is whether it has a specific nature²; a nature that could perhaps best explain why we give importance to it. There are two conflicting philosophical views about this question: those who affirm that truth indeed has a specific nature and those who deny it.

Those who affirm that truth has a specific nature see truth as a substantial property. The motivating idea behind this is that by ascribing “is true,” “it’s true,” or any of its cognates to a given truth-bearer something theoretically significant is being added to it. Thus, there is something significant that will be added to the sentence “It’s raining,” if we put “is true” after it. Those who deny this claim that when we say that a given truth-bearer is true, the predicate “is true” does not add anything significant to it at all. Furthermore, to assert that “‘It’s raining’ is true” is just to assert that “It’s raining.” As such, for them, truth has no specific nature. The former view is known as inflationist theories of truth; the latter as deflationist theories.

Inflationist theories are those which claim that truth has a specific nature. But among these theories a further distinction should be made between those who claim that an adequate analysis of truth is possible and those who deny it. Those who claim that we could have an analysis of truth subscribe to a correspondence, coherence, pragmatic or a verificationist theory of truth. For these theorists, truth is correspondence to facts,

¹ Truth-bearers might be sentences, utterances (i.e. speech acts of the assertive type), propositions, or beliefs. It should be noted that the development of a particular philosophical theory of truth sometimes depend on the sort of truth-bearer chosen.

² In philosophical jargon, “nature” is synonymous with “essence.”

coherence with other beliefs, usefulness of such a belief, or else verifiability of statements. Those who deny that there could be an analysis of truth claim that though truth is a substantial property, no philosophically interesting analysis is possible. This is so since the concept of truth is a simple, indefinable, concept. This latter view is known as Moorean Primitivism—named after the English philosopher, G. E. Moore.

Deflationist theories of truth come in different varieties: redundancy theory, disappearance theory, no-truth theory, disquotational theory, and minimalist theory. But whatever version we pick, one overall claim seems to be basic among them: viz., that truth has no specific nature. One motivation for accepting this kind of theory is its anti-metaphysical stance. Deflationists see that the inflationists' project of looking for the nature of truth as a theoretical dead-end, since for them, truth has no nature. All there is to truth, says a deflationist, can be captured by the equivalence schema (ES): $\langle p \rangle$ is true just in case p ; nothing more, nothing less.

Inflationist Theories of Truth

All inflationists believe that truth has a specific nature. They differ, though, as to what that nature is supposed to be, and whether such a nature could be analyzed. This section discusses three inflationist analysis of truth and the problems they incur. These theories are correspondence theory, coherence theory, pragmatic theory, and verificationist theory.³

Correspondence Theory

Correspondence theory, as in all inflationist theories, truth has a specific nature. For correspondence theorists, the nature of truth is the correspondence of a given truth-bearer to a fact. Thus, the statement "It's raining" is true just in case it is in fact raining.

One argument in favor of this theory is its direct appeal to commonsense; it captures our ordinary way of thinking about the relationship between truth and reality. If someone claims that there is Yamashita treasure hidden underneath the university library, it is obvious to us that if indeed such treasure were to be found there, that person's claim would be true and false otherwise. As such, truth is nothing but the correspondence of a given truth-bearer to a fact. And for correspondence theorists, this is the nature of truth.

Two commitments of correspondence theory are noteworthy here. First is its commitment to a robust form of realism. Truth is defined in terms of correspondence to a fact, where a fact is thought to be a mind-independent bit of reality. Facts make a truth-bearer true; without it, according to correspondence theorists, nothing would ever be true. Second is its appeal to a certain relation, the correspondence relation, to explain the nature of truth. The idea here is that there is a kind of structural isomorphism (sameness of structure) between truth-bearers and facts, which, if present, implies truth. For a given truth-bearer, say the belief that Percy is tall, something in the world (say, the fact that Percy is really tall) is actually mirrored by such a belief for the belief to be true. These two

³ There are other inflationist accounts of truth. There is the pragmatic theory which claims that truth is the end of inquiry, or something that which is useful to believe in. We would not discuss these other theories here.

commitments make correspondence theory the theory of truth it is, but, as we shall see later, they are both controversial.

Correspondence theory, therefore, tells us that a given truth-bearer is true if and only if it corresponds to the way the world is. The correspondence formula can be as follows:

A truth-bearer, p , is true iff (if and only if) p corresponds to the fact that p asserts.

Truth then is a certain relation between the statement and its corresponding fact. For example: The statement "Snow is white" is true iff the statement corresponds to the fact that snow is white. Correspondingly, to say that a statement is false is to say that such a statement does not correspond to a given fact. For example: The statement "Snow is black" is false since it does not correspond to the fact that snow is white.

The correspondence theory assumes that discovering the truth or falsity of a given truth-bearer simply involves comparing it with the fact it asserts. Thus a statement is true when there is a corresponding fact, and is false when there is no corresponding fact.

Criticisms against Correspondence Theory

Objectors to the correspondence theory identify certain difficulties with the theory. It seems fair to say that correspondence theory applies to truths in the domain of science and ordinary experience but fails in others. In the domain of morality for example, some theorists argue that moral statements could be true even if there are no moral facts to which they could correspond to. Hence, at least in the domain of morality, truths do not necessarily correspond to facts.

Another criticism against correspondence theory has something to do with its commitment to a robust realism. Suppose that we have a true disjunctive statement of the form, "P or Q." Since correspondence theory tells us that a given truth-bearer is true just in case there is fact that corresponds to it, it follows that there are disjunctive facts as well. If "P or Q" is true, according to friends of correspondence theory, there should be a disjunctive fact that makes it true. This is problematic, since to accept correspondence theory we must accept complex facts as part of our reality. Facts like the disjunction of table being brown and the chair being sturdy would be part of the furniture of reality.

To drive the point home, consider true negative statements. Since it is true that there are no pink elephants on the table, for correspondence theorists, this implies that there are non-existent pink elephants on the table. Now this is problematic because to accept correspondence theory commits us to accept non-existent objects as part of reality. Like the case of disjunctive facts, correspondence theory seems to imply the commitment to non-existent facts.

Coherence Theory

According to coherence theory a given truth-bearer is true just in case it coheres or is consistent with other statements or beliefs. The condition of a truth-bearer's truth is simply its coherence or consistency within a set of statements or a web of belief. Coherence theory shifts the focus away from correspondence to facts in the world to the systematic

consistency of statements or beliefs themselves. For example, the statement “Snow is white” involves the whole English language such that the sentence means something only on the basis of its dependence on other sentences in English. Thus, “Snow is white” is true just in case it coheres with the other sentences in English.

The general idea of coherence theory can be summed up as follows:

A given truth-bearer, *p*, is true iff *p* coheres with some set of statements or beliefs.

The coherence theory reveals how we arrive at knowledge, namely, how we try to fit our beliefs together into a coherent whole. Dowden and Swartz (2002) illustrate the point through this example. Do we accept as true a drunk driver’s statement: “There are pink elephants dancing on the highway in front of us”? The truth or falsehood of his statement (in fact, we reject it as false) is determined by considering other beliefs that we have already accepted as true like:

- (1) Elephants are gray, not pink.
- (2) This place is not where elephants live.
- (3) There is no zoo nearby.
- (4) Severely intoxicated persons are known to experience hallucinations.
- (5) Nobody else in the area claims to have seen any pink elephants.

To establish the truth of one statement one needs to get other statements to cohere in a unified body of knowledge. This coherence makes it true. Blanshard (1941) wrote: “The degree of truth of a particular proposition (statement) is to be judged by its coherence with experience as a whole.” Truth, then, is nothing more than the interconnectedness of our various beliefs. Its test is how well it fits in with everything else we believe.

Criticisms against Coherence Theory

Many criticize coherence theory in various fronts. Some have argued that it is possible that a system of statements or beliefs can be coherent but not true. The denial of an entire system of true beliefs can still form a coherent system but will yield only false statements and beliefs. An argument can be valid (coherent) yet have false premises and false conclusions.

Others argue that two mutually exclusive systems of statements or beliefs can be equally coherent but surely, both cannot be true as one entails the negation of the other. We can present a coherent argument for creation in time and for creation from eternity; or for determinism and indeterminism. We can build a case for both “Absence makes the heart grow fonder” and “Out of sight, out of mind”.

Bertrand Russell (1998, ch. XII: 2) thinks that there is no reason to suppose that only *one* coherent body of beliefs is possible. Russell’s objection is based on the possibility that life is one long dream, and that the outer world has only that degree of reality that the objects of dreams have; but although such a view does not seem inconsistent with known facts, there is no reason to prefer it to the common-sense view that other people and things do really exist. Thus, the definition of truth according to coherence theory fails because there is no proof that there can be only one coherent system.

Again, Russell (1998, ch. XII: 2) mentions another objection to coherence theory. “Coherence” presupposes the truth of the laws of logic. Two propositions are coherent when both may be true, and are incoherent when one at least must be false. In order to know whether two propositions can both be true, we must know such truths as the law of non-contradiction which states: A proposition cannot be both true and false at the same time and in the same respect. For example, the propositions — “It is raining” and “It is not raining” — are not coherent, because of the law of contradiction. But is it possible to apply the test of coherence to the law of noncontradiction? If we choose to suppose the principle to be false, nothing will any longer be incoherent with anything else. Thus the laws of logic supply the skeleton or framework within which the test of coherence applies, and they themselves cannot be established by the test of coherence.

Pragmatic Theory

Three American philosophers—C. S. Peirce, William James and John Dewey—are most easily identified with Instrumentalism or Pragmatism or Pragmaticism. Peirce was the first who used the term “Pragmatism” derived from the Greek word, “*pragma*,” which means “practice.” But due to some personal conflict between James, Peirce coined the term, “Pragmaticism,” to differentiate himself from other so-called pragmatists. Dewey can be credited with the term, “Instrumentalism.” However, we could say that whatever term we may use to label them one thing is certain, pragmatism is a philosophical theory that is concerned with how any theory whatsoever can be applied to life or practice.

A pragmatic theory of truth claims that the condition of a statement’s truth is neither its correspondence to a fact nor its coherence to other statements. Rather, it is its usefulness in solving problems and answering inquiries. In short, truth is, to use Peirce’s description, the end of inquiry. The meaning of truth is the practical difference it serves.

According to James (1907), pragmatism asks its usual questions, “Grant an idea or belief to be true, what concrete difference will its being true make in any one’s actual life? What experiences will be different from those which would obtain if the belief were false? What, in short, is the truth’s cash value—value in experiential terms?”

Truth is not a stagnant property of an idea. “Truth happens to an idea. It becomes true. It is made true by events.” “Possession of true thoughts means everywhere the possession of invaluable instruments of action.” The pragmatic formulation of this is:

A truth-bearer, *p*, is true iff *p* is useful to be believed in.

That is, granting that a given statement works this factor would make that statement a true statement. Utility (“payoff” or success), therefore, is the essential mark of truth. It follows that the statements “It is useful because it is true,” and “It is true because it is useful” mean exactly the same thing: an idea gets fulfilled and can be verified. Truth is what works.

For example, the statement “There are gravitational forces that govern the movement of the planets” cannot really be said to be true by looking at the corresponding fact since gravity cannot really be seen. Nor can we say that it is true simply by looking at how it coheres with other statements since these other statements may turn out to be false. We are assured, however, by pragmatic theory that this statement is true since it has a

utility value in explaining certain phenomena. It helps us explain the phenomenon of the movement of the planets, or eclipses, or whatnot. In short, the statement works in aiding our knowledge of astronomical phenomena.

Criticisms against the Pragmatic Theory

One objection against pragmatic theory has something to do with the possibility of useful but false beliefs. Sometimes we say, "Truth hurts." At times, false beliefs make us happier than the truth. From this, some theorists have objected that a belief might work but not be true. Hence, the pragmatic theory fails with regards to the possibility of useful but false beliefs.

Another objection against the pragmatic theory was raised by Russell. Russell (1945) argued that true beliefs work because they are true; they are true not because they work, but work because they are true to the facts. In short, we cannot equate the truth of a particular belief with its usefulness. They simply come apart!

Another objection raised by Russell (1912) against the pragmatic theory is the difference between an *indicator* of truth and the *meaning* of the concept truth. Russell argues that pragmatism confuses these two. Pragmatism describes an *indicator* or a *sign* of truth which is different from *giving the meaning* of truth. When the streetlights are turned on at the end of a day, it is an indicator, or a sign, that it is already evening. It would be an obvious mistake to say that the word "evening" just means "the time that the streetlights turn on."

A final objection against pragmatism revolves around the very notion of the usefulness of a belief. How do we make sense of this notion? It is sometimes useful to tell lies. According to pragmatic theory, this implies that lies can be true. But this is an absurd conclusion! Lies by definition are false statements. Now since they are false, they cannot be true. As such, the concept of usefulness which friends of pragmatic theory espouse is incoherent.

Verificationist Theory

Verificationist account of truth stems from its implied theory of meaning. For verificationists, meaningful statements are either analytic (true in virtue of meaning) or empirical (true in virtue of being verifiable by sense-experience). Sentences that do not fall under either of the two are meaningless; hence are not even truth-evaluable. For example, the statement, "All bachelors are unmarried males," is meaningful since it is an analytic statement. The statement, "There is Yamashita treasure hidden in the library," is also meaningful since it is empirically verifiable.

On the verificationist account, truth is just the verifiability of sentences.⁴ In general, the verificationist definition of truth would come to following formula:

A given truth-bearer, p, is true iff p is verifiable.

⁴ A. J. Ayer (1976) provides a defense of the verificationist theory.

This formula shows that any truth-bearer is true just in case there is a way to verify it. Note that the verificationist account of truth is more epistemic than metaphysical. Contra correspondence theory, verificationists do not think that truth is something independent of us; it is something confined in our very ability to know or verify, in principle, sentences. Thus, the sentence “Snow is white” is true just in case there is a way by which we could verify that snow is white. Because of its appeal to the epistemic notion of verifiability, the verificationist theory of truth is open to many criticisms.

Criticisms against the Verificationist Theory

One telling objection against the verificationist account of truth has something to do with the notion of verifiability itself. Friends of the verificationist theory hold that truth is just verifiability. This implies that only statements that are verifiable can be true. But what is it to verify some statement? Suppose that we want to ascertain whether Egyptian Pharaohs ate meat. Of course there is no way this could be verified at the present moment. Thus, for friends of the verificationist theory, our inquiry would not yield to either a true or a false indictment; it is simply meaningless to inquire about something that could not be verified or falsified. But surely, it is possible that Pharaohs did eat meat as it is also possible that they did not eat. This implies that the statement, “Pharaohs ate meat,” has a truth value (it is either true or false). If such is the case, then the truth (and falsity) of a given truth-bearer does not depend on its verifiability.

A related objection against the verificationist theory is about the truth of unverified truth-bearers.⁵ Suppose we ask of the recently deceased Mr. Santos whether he was brave or not. Now Mr. Santos was a recluse and never in his life was he able to show whether he was brave or not. For friends of the verificationist theory, there is no way to verify whether Mr. Santos was brave or not. As in the Pharaoh case, it is simple pointless to talk about the truth (or falsity) of Mr. Santos’ bravery. But surely, there it could be true that Mr. Santos was brave had the chance to show it was there. It could also be true that Mr. Santos was not brave had the circumstances been different. Just like in the Pharaoh case, Mr. Santos’ bravery could be true or false and whatever the case may be is independent of whether we could verify it or not.

Deflationist Theories of Truth

We have seen the leading inflationist theories of truth and the criticisms against each of them. In this section, we now turn our attention to deflationist theories of truth.⁶

If inflationist theories claim that truth has a specific nature, e.g., truth could either be the correspondence to certain facts, coherence with other beliefs, etc., theories that could be grouped under deflationism argue the contrary by claiming that 'true' denotes no substantial property. To assert that a statement “is true” is nothing more than just to assert the statement itself.

According to various versions of deflationary theory, the statement “‘Percy is tall’ is true’ merely states that “Percy is tall.” This is in sharp contrast to the correspondence

⁵ The following example comes from Michael Dummett (1978) as discussed in Garrett (2011, 142-143).

⁶ The exposition here follows Garrett’s discussion of deflationism. See Garrett (2011, 145-147).

theory, for instance, wherein the earlier statement corresponds to a certain fact, i.e., Percy really is tall. The paradigm example of this deflationist approach to truth was first outlined by Frege.

Frege (1918) argued that "...the sentence 'I smell the scent of violets' has the same content as the sentence 'it is true that I smell the scent of violets'. So it seems, then, that nothing is added to the thought by my ascribing to it the property of truth."

To further motivate deflationism, Frege also offered objections to inflationism, specifically against the correspondence theory. For instance, he points out that propositions X and Y could only correspond to one another if and only if $X = Y$. Thus, perfectly corresponding things are identical. But it is essential for correspondence theorists that fact and truth be distinct.

As mentioned earlier, the correspondence theory states that the nature of truth is the correspondence of a certain truth-bearer to a fact. What Frege does in this objection is to corner the proponents of this view to insist that there is a perfectly workable notion of correspondence that falls short of identity (or at least that Frege has not shown that there is not).

F. P. Ramsey (1927), also a leading advocate of deflationist theory, claims that "...it is evident that 'It is true that Caesar was murdered' means no more than that Caesar was murdered, and 'It is false that Caesar was murdered' means no more than Caesar was not murdered."

Like Frege, Ramsey points out that, at least in cases where the proposition or thought is given, the presence of the word 'true' adds nothing to the meaning of what is said. Thus, 'it's true that "roses are red"' or "'roses are red" is true' says no more than that roses are red. By adding "is true" in a statement, one is just being redundant of what was originally asserted in the first place.

There are several other theories that support the deflationist theory of truth. For example, we have minimalism, no-truth theory, redundancy theory, and the disquotational theory. But even if they differ in various ways, they all share a single basic idea: Truth has no metaphysical nature. Truth does not have a distinct property beyond what is asserted by ordinary statements. Also, another thing that deflationists share is the so-called equivalence schema (where '<p>' is a name of a sentence or proposition):

(ES) <p> is true if and only if p.

This schema exhausts the content of "is true." For example, we could fill in 'p' with "Snow is white" and the schema would simply read as "'Snow is white" is true if and only if "Snow is white"'. Through this formulation deflationists only provide the concept of truth and not an explicit definition of truth. The function of 'true' is not to denote a substantial property but to simply underwrite the moves from '<p> is true' to 'p' and from 'p' to '<p> is true'.

Criticisms against Deflationist Theory

One objection against deflationism is the idea that we have a firm intuition that truth depends on facts, i.e., $\langle p \rangle$ "is true" because it is true in virtue of how the world is (something external to the statement itself). Because deflationism deems statements like "Grass is green" and "'Grass is green' is true" as one and the same in the sense that "is true" does not really add anything, a deflationist is committed to accept a questionable proposition as true like 'The statement that "'grass is green" is true' if and only if "grass is green"'. This is problematic given that the proposition "grass is green" is true because grass is indeed green in the world. On the other hand, it is not the case that grass is green in the world because of the proposition "Grass is green" is true. In short, deflationists fail to see that a given truth-bearer is true because of how the world is.

Furthermore, to cite another objection against deflationism, it is accepted that language abounds with vague terms such as bald, many, red, tall, etc. Being bald, for instance, clearly applies to some people, clearly does not apply to some, and neither clearly applies nor clearly fails to apply to others. In terms of baldness, how would you classify someone (say, named Ben) who has some hair, a couple of strands maybe, but really not much? On the standard account, the statement "Ben is bald" is neither true or false given that Ben has a borderline case of baldness.

Vague terms can feature in sentences which are true, false or indeterminate, i.e., neither true nor false. Consider any indeterminate sentence 's'. Does this sentence satisfy (ES)? A biconditional such as (ES) is true if both sides of the 'if and only if' have the same truth-value. Consider the following instance of (ES):

(S) $\langle s \rangle$ is true if and only if s.

If 's' is indeterminate, then presumably ' $\langle s \rangle$ is true' is false. In that case the left-hand side of (S) is false while the right-hand side is indeterminate. Because the two sides of (S) fail to have the same truth-value, (S) cannot be true. And given that (S) is an instance of (ES), then (ES) is also not true.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have explored the question about the nature of truth. We also discussed different theories which account for the nature of truth. We found that these theories also have problems. The philosophical issue about truth remains open and we invite you to join in the discussion!

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Questions and Activities for Reflection

1. What are the main criticisms against each of the leading inflationist theories of truth? Are they surmountable? How?
2. Think of other definitions of truth. Scrutinize them with all your philosophical skill.
3. Think of ways that truth matters in your life. Reflect on why it matters. Note what theory of truth you are assuming in your reflection.