

Truth about artifacts

Abstract: Truth in a correspondence sense is objective in two ways. It is objective because the relation of correspondence is objective and because the facts to which truths correspond are objective. Truth about artifacts is problematic because artifacts are intentionally designed to perform certain functions, and so are not entirely mind independent. Against this, it is argued in this paper that truth about artifacts is perfectly objective despite the role played by intention and purpose in the production of artifacts.

Keywords: Truth; correspondence; facts; artifacts

I.

It has been raining for days. It is raining still. I hear the patter of raindrops striking the metal roof sheets. Out the window, I see cypress branches, a wet road, a wooden fence, an old riding boot hanging from a fence post, a bale of hay, two kangaroos grazing on the opposite hillside.

We live our lives surrounded by and interacting with artifacts, things that have been made by humans. The window, the roof, the road, the fence, the boot, and the bale of hay, have all been built or made by humans. Though the cypress is a natural object, it is not a member of a native species. It came as a seedling from a nursery and was planted where it now grows. Perhaps the kangaroos are natural objects. But the fact that they choose to live close to humans where they can find grass rather than deeper in the forest gives pause to that thought. Maybe

only the rain is entirely natural. That too is questionable, given the role of humans in the climate change of which the recent heavy rains are an effect.¹

II.

It is true that it is raining, that an old boot is hanging from the fence post, that there are two kangaroos grazing on the hill opposite. But what is it to be true? It is not just to believe that these matters of fact obtain. Nor is it to be justified in believing that they obtain. To be true is for the facts that I have mentioned to obtain. It is for the world to be as it is said to be.

This is the correspondence intuition. The intuition is that for a proposition or belief to be true is for it to correspond to the way that the world in fact is.² Suppose I assert the proposition, “There is a boot hanging from the fence post”. Or suppose I believe there is a boot hanging from the fence post. For the proposition or the belief to be true, one thing and one thing only is required. There must in fact be a boot hanging from the fence post. The boot’s hanging from the fence post is both necessary and sufficient for the truth of the proposition that the boot is hanging from the fence post. The same applies for the associated belief.

To briefly spell the point out, truth is a property that a proposition possesses in virtue of bearing a certain relationship to reality. The relationship holds when what the proposition asserts to be the case is in fact the case. To continue with the example of the boot, the proposition “There is a boot hanging from the fence post” is true just in case there is a boot hanging from the fence post. The proposition asserts that a certain fact involving the boot

¹ I assume for present purposes that artifacts are produced by humans rather than by non-human animals. Thus, I will set aside the question of whether bird nests, spider webs, beaver dams and wombat burrows constitute artifacts.

² Nothing important hangs on my use of the term ‘proposition’. I use the term ‘proposition’ simply to refer to the content of beliefs. A proposition is that, whatever it is, that two sentences of different languages which are precise translations of each other have in common. It is what both such sentences express. If you do not like propositions, feel free to think in terms of sentences, claims or assertions instead.

obtains. To be true, the fact asserted by the proposition must obtain. The relationship between the true proposition and the fact that obtains is the relationship of correspondence.

The idea that truth is correspondence takes truth to be non-epistemic. The relation of correspondence between what is asserted to be the case and the way that the world is does not depend on belief or any form of epistemic justification. The truth of a proposition is a property that the proposition possesses whether what it asserts to be the case is believed to be the case or not.³ Indeed, the proposition may be true regardless of whether the proposition is justified or belief in the proposition is justified. Truth is a matter of how the world is. It is not a matter of how we believe the world to be or of what we are justified in believing about the world.

III.

Truth, in the correspondence sense just indicated, is objective. Indeed, it is objective twice over. As I have argued elsewhere, the objectivity of truth is twofold.⁴

First, the relation of correspondence is an objective relation that obtains independently of whether one believes that it obtains. Even if I (or anyone else) did not believe that there is a boot on the fence post across the road, it would still be the case that there is a boot on the fence post. It is true that there is a boot on the fence post even if I (or anyone else) do not believe that there is a boot on the fence post. The relation of correspondence obtains objectively, independently of whether it is believed to obtain. Truth is objective in virtue of being a non-epistemic relation of correspondence that holds between what we say or believe and the way the world is. Let us call this the correspondence aspect of the objectivity of truth.

Second, correspondence truth is objective because the facts to which true propositions correspond have objective status. It is not just that the correspondence relation is objective.

³ A similar remark applies, of course, for falsity: a false proposition has the property of being false regardless of whether anybody believes that the proposition is false.

⁴ See my 'The Twofold Objectivity of Truth'.

The facts themselves are objective. Facts obtain in a way that is independent of our beliefs or thoughts about them. The fact that the boot is hanging from the fence post does not depend in any way on thoughts about the boot or the fence post. It is an objective fact that obtains independently of whether anyone is aware that it obtains. It is the way that the world objectively is that makes it true that there is a boot hanging from the fence post. Let us call this the factual aspect of the objectivity of truth.

IV.

At this point, a problem emerges. The boot and the fence post were made by humans. The boot was made to be worn (not to hang from the fence post). The fence was built to keep animals in. The fence post is part of the fence. It contributes to the purpose for which the fence was built. A boot maker made the boot for a purpose. A fence builder built the fence to perform a function.

How, then, can the fact that the boot is hanging from the fence post be objective? Neither the boot nor the fence post exists in a way that is devoid of mental involvement. Both depend upon the intentions with which they were made and the role they were meant to play. If objectivity requires mind-independence, both the boot and the fence post fail to be objective. Equally, the fact that the boot is hanging from the fence post is not an objective fact.

Here we have an objection to the idea that truth about artifacts is objective. The objection is not that the non-epistemic relation of correspondence fails to be objective. The objection is that the facts that make claims about artifacts true fail to be objective facts. This is an objection to the factual aspect of the objectivity of truth, not the correspondence aspect.

V.

Is this a good objection to the factual aspect of the objectivity of truth?

I do not think so. The objection exaggerates the significance of mental factors in the production of artifacts. It is true that the boot was made by a boot maker. The boot maker formed the intention to make the boot and made the boot so that the boot might perform a certain function. It is also true that the fence was built by a fence builder. The fence builder formed the intention to build the fence and built the fence to perform a certain function. The fence post was positioned in the post hole as part of the process of building the fence. As for the location of the boot, someone attached the boot to the fence post with a piece of rope. That was an intentional action, though what the purpose of the action might have been is a subject for speculation.

Both intention and purpose contribute to the circumstances surrounding the fact that the boot is hanging from the fence post. This reflects the fact that both the boot and the fence post are artifacts produced by human hand. It also reflects the fact that a human actor engaged in the intentional activity of suspending the boot from the fence post.

None of this detracts in the slightest from the objectivity of the fact that the boot is hanging from the fence post. Once the boot has been attached to the fence post, it is a fact that the boot is hanging from the fence post. That remains the case until such time as the boot ceases to hang from the fence post. This may occur through various means, including human action or events not produced by human action. The fact that the boot is hanging from the fence post is an objective fact that obtains no matter what human intention or purpose led to it being there in the first place.

That the boot and fence post are artifacts is irrelevant to the objectivity of the fact that the boot is hanging from the fence post. It is no doubt a relevant feature of the history that lies behind the fact that the boot is hanging from the fence post that both boot and fence post were made by humans. But it is simply irrelevant to the obtaining of the fact that the boot is hanging from the fence post. That fact is as objective as you can get.

VI.

What, then, are we to say of truth about artifacts?

To my mind, the truth about an artifact is as objective as any other truth. This holds for both aspects of the objectivity of truth. It is both the case that the correspondence aspect of truth about artifacts is objective, and that the factual aspect of truth about artifacts is objective. The proposition, “There is a boot hanging from the fence post”, corresponds to the fact that there is a boot hanging from the fence post. It is both the case that the correspondence relation is objective, and that the fact is objective.

Hence, we may say that truth about artifacts, like truth in general, is objective in a twofold sense.