

Truth

Truth is a difficult concept to define because the word "truth" has long stood as a symbol for such a variety of our deepest concerns and highest aspirations. Stubborn zeal has characterized the human search for truth. Especially in Western civilization there has been strong support for the conviction that the hunger for truth is one of humankind's noblest passions. Science and religion alike claim to seek and to profess the truth. But what is truth? When this question is examined carefully, it becomes apparent that there are quite different ways of viewing truth. Three alternative stands on the nature of truth will be explored in this chapter.

a. The correspondence theory. "True" and "false" are terms typically used to assess the quality of a statement. Correspondence theory holds that a statement is true if it corresponds to objective reality; that is, an expression of truth is one that states a fact or describes an event as it really and independently exists. The fact or event is "there," and its independent existence is affirmed by the experience or perception of a human being. Proof that it is "really there" is established by one or more other human beings who also experience or perceive it and who then confirm the original statement. If I say, "There is an airplane flying overhead," you can look up and see whether my statement is correct. If you see the airplane, you will no doubt conclude that I have spoken the truth. We would be in agreement that something actually exists in the air above us and that the word "airplane" accurately describes what it is. Further discussion might reveal that we disagree on the particular kind of airplane it was or on the speed of its flight, but my original statement that there was indeed an airplane flying overhead would not be judged false. Scientists constantly direct our attention to the "facts," or the data, and facts we have reference to must be observable by others. Disagreement about the existence of pertinent facts or differences in the perceptions of those facts means that any statement made about the open to serious question. These disagreements – and the doubts that result – increase the ability that the statement may not be true. Under such conditions statement might indeed be judged false. But, in the final analysis supporters of the correspondence theory of truth argue that accurate perceptions or observations are a sufficient basis for reporting the state of affairs and that accurate perceptions precisely stated result in reasonable disagreement.

Critiques of the Correspondence Theory

- Certain difficulties with the correspondence theory are encountered when we expand the hypothetical illustration involving the airplane. Suppose a third person were to look into the sky and say, "The two of you have poor eyesight. That is not an airplane; it is a hawk." Now who is most accurately describing

what is actually up there? We know each person does not have the same visual acuity. We also believe that at times (in dreams, for example) people see what is not really there. Perception can be distorted. If each of us persists in our conviction, how is it possible to decide who is speaking the truth? Few people would be satisfied with bringing the issue to a vote and letting the majority decide, for one of the things that the history of science has tended to demonstrate is that the majority is often mistaken on points of fact.

- The correspondence theory does not help us to resolve questions of truth in those fields where there are no "facts," in the sense of things capable of being verified or measured by objective criteria. There is no way of demonstrating whether or not the principles of love or justice are true. There is no basis on which the correspondence theory can assert the truth or falsity of the belief that a human being possesses an eternal soul. Or take the case of a theory such as evolution, which is defended by citing verifiable and measurable 'facts'. How do we decide whether or not the theory of evolution 'corresponds' with those 'facts' itself is not an object or a thing "out there" that we can perceive as existing or not existing. The correspondence theory has another weakness. Within the theory itself there is no way to judge the adequacy of the generalizations being used. Since most of our knowledge consists of generalizations, this is a serious shortcoming.

b. The coherence theory. The coherence theory of truth maintains that truth is a property exhibited by a related group of consistent propositions. A particular statement, or proposition, is true if it is totally integrated with other statements or propositions already established as part of the whole system. New propositions can be added to the conceptual foundation to form a more intricate pattern. As long as a new proposition can be incorporated in such a way that it does not contradict or invalidate the basic propositions (or any propositions derived there from), then the new proposition can be affirmed as true; what does not fit cannot claim to be true. The coherence theory can be described as the "hang-together" theory. Mathematics illustrates the theory of coherence. A mathematical system is built, step by step, from a certain number of basic propositions. Plane geometry affords a familiar example. Using Euclid's geometry as a model, Plato developed a coherence theory of truth. He believed that he had discovered a means for attaining truth that owed nothing to observation or sensory experience beyond what could be represented in a symbolic or diagrammatic way. Plato was persuaded that he had discovered the true and perfect world of ideal (or non-sensible) Forms, which are connected to one another by eternal and necessary relations that the reasoning mind alone can trace. This world of ideas, when grasped by thought, reveals a complete system of immutable and necessary truth. Scientific theories also exhibit a pattern of coherence. In general, a theory is acceptable only if it is consistent with already established laws or principles. For example, although there are claims that

extrasensory perception (ESP) has been experimentally demonstrated, the theory is not widely accepted because it fails to cohere with many of the organized principles on which physical science relies. The coherence theory is illustrated in the world of everyday affairs by the person who wants some center to his life – some reliable categories to use in ordering and classifying the confusion. Countless stimuli attack him. Contradictory opinions and judgments are imposed upon him. Without some established criteria by which he can discriminate, organize, or judge, he feels lost and directionless. If he can find one or more basic propositions worthy of his allegiance, he then has the power to integrate his experience, separate what is worth keeping from what is not, and organize his knowledge. In short, using the principal of coherence gives him a way to organize and view his life. Kant's phenomenistic theory of perception would place heavy reliance on the kind of proof afforded by the coherence theory of truth.

Critiques of the Coherence Theory

- One of the difficulties encountered in the coherence theory is that it sometimes relies on beginning postulates or assumptions whose cannot be demonstrated or proved. No "proof" can be offered to set of starting assumptions is ultimately better than another. Within the coherence tradition itself, philosophers have violently disagreed at basic postulates on which coherence systems of truth should be structured. Plato's basic assumption that ideas are fixed and unchanging stands in dramatic contrast to the assertion of Teilhard de Chardin, late Roman Catholic priest and paleontologist, that evolutionary change is the fundamental characteristic of all things. Plato and de Chardin erected their coherence theories on radically different foundations. Even if coherence is the criterion of truth, a person could, by putting faith in a particular coherence theory, run the risk of being unalterably wrong because the starting premises were inadequate or incorrect. Furthermore, it takes two propositions to apply the coherence theory (something to cohere with something else), there is one proposition to which this theory cannot be applied – namely, that truth means coherence.
- Coherence theorists not only fail to agree on a starting point, but when they get around to integrating propositions from many and different areas of experience, they also reach no consensus. Religious and scientific world views continue to express irreconcilable contradictions and inconsistencies – no matter how beautifully coherent each may be as a separate system.

c. The pragmatic theory. We now shift our attention to a criterion of truth that seeks to avoid both the limitations and the extremes of either the correspondance or the coherence theory. The distinctive American approach to the problem is expressed in the

philosophies of men like C. S. Peirce, William James, John Dewey, and C. I. Lewis and is called pragmatism.

Pragmatism takes the stand that what is true is what works. Truth can be defined only in terms of consequences. According to the pragmatist, a statement is true if it accurately describes a situation or relationship on which a person can act in order to achieve a desired result. In this view human beings in their ongoing activities create truth. Truth is judged in terms of its effectiveness in assisting people to integrate their knowledge, predict the course of events, or achieve a desired goal. The pragmatist is content to find truth in the successful completion of an invention (for example, a computer), a theory by which a course of events can be more accurately predicted (for example, a theory of personality development), or in the organization of life experiences into a pattern that satisfies human needs or desires (for example, a democratic form of government). For the pragmatist, truth has a "cash value." It pays off. The pragmatic theory of truth is humanity-centered; people make truth. Pragmatists do not concern themselves with absolute or ultimate truth. For them truth does not possess an independent existence; it is not "out there" waiting to be discovered. Pragmatists adopt the position that truth is being continuously shaped by human thought and action as particular hypotheses are subjected to the practical test of action and its consequences. They often point to the activities carried out in a scientific experiment as an example of truth making. The pragmatic theory of truth has been called upon in many cases to prove the claims of contemporary realism as a theory of perception. Final judgment rests on the answer to the question "Does it work?"

Critiques of the Pragmatic Theory

- Many people are totally dissatisfied with viewing truth as tentative and changeable. They find no security or hope in a theory of truth that is not solidly grounded in the stable nature of things. If the nature of what is so is not definite and clearly identifiable, it has no right to be parading under the banner of "truth."
- More sophisticated critics point out that there is no necessary connection between what is ultimately true, on the one hand, and what just happens to work or what is useful to believe, on the other. They note that the human is small and its days brief and they argue that there is more to the universe than what stumbling seekers might happen to find or what nearsighted viewers might happen to see. In short, they maintain that humankind is not the measure of all things and truth cannot be based on the fallible judgments of finite human

beings. These critics might accept the proposition that "what is true works" while rejecting the pragmatic assertion that "what works is true."

Source: *Invitation to Philosophy*, Honer, S.M. and Hunt, T.C., Wadsworth Inc. 1987 pp. 36 - 51.

Questions: The Nature of Truth

Which truth test would you run to test the truth of the following:

A. coherence (logical truths fitting in an existing framework)

B. correspondence (observational truths)

C. pragmatic (what works)

1. The "Hollywood Diet" lets people lose weight quickly.
2. Metals expand when heated.
3. A triangle has three sides.
4. Marriage is better for men than women.
5. The current population of Tokyo is larger than that of Hong Kong.
6. Jupiter's moon Europa is intriguing.
7. All wives have husbands.
8. Montreal sits on a dormant volcano.
9. The best team will win the world series.
10. Green plants absorb all visible wavelengths of light but green.
11. If Bert is a younger son, then he is a brother.
12. It is raining now in Rangoon.
13. The hydrogen atom has one electron.

14. She is a real friend.
15. Shakespeare wrote "Romeo and Juliet".
16. What a good picture that is of her!
17. The equator is a real place.
18. Capitalism produces the wealthiest countries.
19. There is an elephant in this room.
20. There is an invisible elephant in this room.
21. A perfect circle can never be drawn.
22. Killing another person is unacceptable.
23. His face looks sunburnt.
24. It is better to have loved and lost, than to never have loved at all.
25. Our galaxy has a black hole in the centre.