

THEORIES OF TRUTH

OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this e-content is to introduce the theories of truth, the core concept in the theory of knowledge. The words ‘truth’ and ‘true’ are much used, misused and misunderstood word. Though the concept appears to be simple, when we go deep into it we will feel its mysterious nature. The questions, “What is truth?” and “How to know the truth?” are as ancient as man himself. In this unit we will try to make a survey of the theories of truth that the philosophers have put forward and to examine their merits and demerits. It is the duty of every human being to continue the quest to understand the importance of the concept of truth and to approach it with awe and respect.

Thus by the end of this lesson you should be able

- to have a glimpse of the complexity of the concept “truth”;
- to understand the importance of truth.
- to have a better understanding of the nature and criteria of truth;
- to get a general view of the different theories of truth

INTRODUCTION

In court, witnesses swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. They are expected to know what truth means and in some sense they do. At the same time the concept ‘truth’ is abstract, ambiguous and mysterious. The meaning of the word “truth” that concerns philosophers is something akin to what a witness assumes in the court room to report what he/she believes to be true in statements or propositions. This is the sense of the word that matters most in our everyday lives.

Voltaire says that we may define truth humanly speaking but we should always wait for a better definition because there is no final definition or one which is definitive for all times. It is a difficult task to define truth for the following reasons: first, truth is an extremely basic concept. It is difficult to engage in any theoretical inquiry without employing it. You cannot even argue over a theory of truth without using the concept, because to question a theory is to question its truth, and to endorse a theory is to endorse it as true. We cannot get behind the concept of truth as we can with other concepts. Secondly, truth is deeply connected to belief. When witnesses assert or endorse what they believe, it implies that they are reporting what they believe to be true. Thirdly, truth is also connected to knowledge: one doesn't know that a particular person committed the crime unless he actually committed it. Truth is the central concept of logic. Fourthly, it is also related to another mysterious concept, reality. To speak the truth is to speak of reality as it is. Truth is interconnected with many concepts and it is very important to understand this interconnection if we want to know what truth is. Knowledge is the recognition of truth. To recognize falsity for truth is a false knowledge. A belief in the truth of a false statement is a mistaken belief. If knowledge excludes all falsity, then certainty becomes essential for knowledge. And if certainty is unattainable it follows that truth and knowledge are also unattainable. Philosophers have been driven to a conception of knowledge so rigorous that there is very little that we can claim to know. But to say that there is no truth is to neglect everything valuable, for what is the use of the good and the beautiful if there were no truths about them? We should admit that absolute certainty or truth is unattainable. Even scientists do not entitle their findings as final or definitive. However, we should continue our search and be ready to abandon the prevailing beliefs when they are proved to be false. We must learn to doubt and then to believe all over again; or, to believe without believing absolutely. How much can we doubt? Skepticism may be defined as the claim that none of our beliefs is objectively justified as more

probably true than its negation. According to the skeptics the search for truth is hopeless and hence every opinion is as good as the others. Skepticism expresses the concern that our beliefs may not accurately correspond to the world in itself. It poses a problem for every theory of truth. A certain degree of doubt is natural and motivates us to search for the truth. But in our daily life we are more believers than doubters. For instance, we believe that our doctor knows how to cure us, we believe that the pilot of our plane knows how to fly it.

NATURE AND CRITERIA OF TRUTH

Theories of truth attempt to give satisfactory answers to the following questions: “What is truth?” and “How to know the truth?” We want to know whether propositions or beliefs are true or false. To deal with propositional truth we can take either the definitional route and define “is true” as qualifying the proposition, or the criterial route and justify the application of “is true” to the proposition.

What is the nature of truth? This is similar to the question, what is the underlying nature of the property of being gold or the substantive facts about gold? Or, what does the word “gold” mean in ordinary English? The result of the inquiry is that gold is an element with atomic number 79. My concept of gold picks out many important and substantive facts about gold, that it is a malleable yellow metal, for instance. When philosophers ask what truth is, they are interested sometimes in the concept, sometimes in the underlying nature of its property, and sometimes in both. Unlike the case of gold, we have no independent, empirical access to the property of truth except via that concept. Thus disputes over the property of truth are frequently fought on conceptual ground, over how we might best define the concept of truth. According to this latter method, we learn about the property of truth by learning about the concept. On the other hand, we might hold that as in the case of gold, learning about the concept can tell us much about the property without necessarily telling us everything about that property. We may know something about the nature of truth and may be able to define truth, but it is not of

much value if we are not able to prove that something is true. The nature and criteria of truth are obviously different. The definition of gold as a yellow metal having atomic number 79 does not help us to determine whether an ornament is really gold. The assayer's test of solubility in *aqua regia* provides criteria to verify gold, but does not define it. Such a distinction is applicable to truth. To know the meaning of the word "true" is only half the matter; we should also be able to apply it. If we adopt the criterial route critics will say, "You are not really tackling the core issue of what is true, but only the marginal issue of what is taken as true." On the contrary if we take the definitional route he/she will say, "Your definition is only formal; it does not help us determine whether a proposition is actually true or false."

THEORIES OF TRUTH

The Correspondence Theory of Truth

According to the correspondence theory of truth a proposition is true just when it agrees with reality. It demands a unique conformity between judgments and states of affairs. It is a systematic development of the commonsense account of truth expressed in dictionary definitions like "conformity with fact." "Delhi is the capital of India" is true because it corresponds to the fact. Aristotle writes: "To say that that which is, is not, or that which is not is, is false; and to say that that which is, is, and that which is not, is not, is true." For St Thomas Aquinas, truth is the agreement or conformity of thing and intellect. Michael Devitt claims that "truth is neither to be identified with, nor to be eliminated in favour of any epistemic notion. Truth is one thing, evidence for it quite another." According to him a sentence correctly represents reality if and only if its component parts bear an appropriate causal relation to certain objects in the world.

Correspondence as congruence says that every truth bearer is correlated to a state of affairs. If the state of affairs to which a given truth bearer is correlated actually obtains, the truth bearer is true; otherwise it is false. For Bertrand Russell it is

beliefs that are true or false and facts make beliefs true. He agrees that beliefs depend on minds for their existence, but claims that they do not depend on minds for their truth. According to him “assertions correspond to states of affairs; they are true if the corresponding states of affairs obtains, and false if it does not.”

Correspondence as correlation claims that there is a structural isomorphism between the truth bearers and the facts to which they correspond when the truth bearer is true. Like the two halves of a torn piece of paper, the parts of the truth bearer fit with the parts of the fact. It is because of this isomorphism that the fact and the truth bearer can be said to correspond with each other. J.L. Austin takes correspondence to be a matter of correlation between whole statements and whole facts or states of affairs. For him this correspondence is not natural but the result of linguistic conventions.

The Coherence Theory of Truth

Immanuel Kant challenged the validity of the classical correspondence theory. Consequently, the post-Kantian philosophical tradition was bound to seek its theory of truth elsewhere. A significant alternative to correspondence theory is the coherence theory, according to which the truthfulness of a proposition is implicit in its “coherence” with other propositions.

The coherence theory has its roots in the idea of a system. According to F.H. Bradley, “Truth is an ideal expression of the Universe, at once coherent and comprehensive. It must not conflict with itself, and there must be no suggestion which fails to fall inside it. Perfect truth, in short, must realize the idea of a systematic whole.” A statement is true if it coheres with a system of other statements, and false if it fails to cohere. But the coherence at issue is not coherence with reality or with facts. The coherence theory proposes the criteria to classify empirical propositions as true or false; it does not specify the constitutive essence of truth. Coherence is the test by which truth-candidates are validated as

genuinely true or rejected as false. It resembles the solving of a jigsaw puzzle by rejecting superfluous pieces that cannot possibly be fitted into the orderly picture. Idealists or anti-realists reject the traditional distinction between subject and object. For them, to think of a thing is to get that thing to a certain degree within the mind. A thought and its object do not differ in kind but in degree of realization. Thought should develop and become more and more coherent until it is literally identical to, or one with reality. Hence reality is the realization of a fully articulated and maximally coherent system of judgments. A particular judgment is true if it belongs to such a system.

For Blanshard "Coherence is the sole criterion of truth." Having accepted the coherence theory of justification, Blanshard felt compelled to accept the coherence theory of truth. He believed that if reality is something completely external to human minds then no theory of justification would ever work. We would never have knowledge except by luck and therefore be forced to accept general scepticism. "If thought and things are conceived as related only externally then knowledge is luck." The way to avoid this, he suggested, is to postulate that the thoughts in our minds are really not completely distinct from the things in the world we think about. For him, "To think of a thing is to get that thing itself in some degree within the mind." With the assumption that the world is coherent, it seems to follow that our beliefs are probably true to the extent they cohere. Hence he endorses the claim that the coherence of beliefs is evidence of their truth.

The Pragmatic Theory

Pragmatism envisages a conception of truth that recognizes a close link between truth and human experience. The pragmatic theory of truth bases itself on the intuition that one cannot profit from error either by rejecting a true proposition or by accepting a false proposition. Being right is the most advantageous policy, and so maximal utility is a safe indicator of truth. The prominent advocates of classical pragmatism are Charles Peirce, William James and John Dewey. For Peirce, a true

proposition is a final and compulsory belief, a belief unassailable by doubt. The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real. Even though the possible hypotheses are infinite, investigation in the long run will eliminate all of them except the true one. A judgment is true if and only if it is justified at the end of scientific inquiry. He renamed his theory as pragmatism when pragmatism was appropriated by Dewey, Schiller and James to label their view. He claims that “human opinion universally tends in the long run to the truth.”

For him the opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate is what we mean by truth. Peirce’s theory of truth is plausible only because it is parasitic on truth as correspondence with reality.

James’ pragmatism could be characterized as a kind of instrumentalism. According to James an empirical judgment is true if it is verifiable. The truth of an idea is the process of its verification and validation. A true idea guides us in our dealings with reality, and hence, a true judgment is what is expedient to believe. Our knowledge of the world, according to James, results from the interaction between our minds and the world. But our minds do not, like mirrors, passively copy facts, but actively manipulate them according to our needs and ends. James insists that truth should be useful, having cash value in experiential terms. Something is useful because it is true and it is true because it is useful. An empirical judgment is true just when it is verifiable. The truth of a judgment consists in its continuous practical use in our lives. Instrumentalism holds that a belief can be useful if it leads to accurate predictions and hence true. I see your knitted brow, see you rub your temples, hear you utter “Owwoo”. The hypothesis that you have a headache would explain these three events. For James the facts of the matter are irrelevant. What counts is the usefulness of the belief. For James usefulness means useful over the long term and when all things are considered. According to John Dewey

an idea is a plan of action or a possible solution and not a copy of the environment. Their validity and value are tested by their practical success. If they succeed in dealing with the problem they are true; if they fail they are false. The idea that guides us well or the hypothesis that works is true. For example, a human being lost in the woods can use his idea as a working hypothesis. If he finds his way home, then his idea is true because it agrees with reality. According to Dewey truth is a mutable concept; it works within the process of inquiry. Truth happens to an idea when it becomes a verified or warranted assertion. Thus he claims that all received truths should be critically tested by new experiences.

Critical Evaluation of Theories of Truth

The oldest criticism against correspondence theory is that it cannot withstand sceptical challenge. If truth is independent of our epistemic values, we have no reason to believe that our best theories are approximately true. Since we cannot step outside our beliefs, we cannot ever check to see if they correspond to the world or not. Therefore we can never know whether our beliefs are true. Another general problem concerns their scope. Traditional correspondence theories take correspondence to be the nature of truth for every proposition. But propositions vary. What would be the correspondence for abstract objects like numbers, fictional characters, justice etc? There are objections to coherence theory of truth. It allows any proposition to be true, since any proposition can be a member of some coherent set or other. There is no independent way, outside coherence, of determining which beliefs are true. The main charge against pragmatic theory of truth is that it leads to relativism. Relativism is incoherent and self-refuting. It is self-refuting to hold a point of view and then say that all points of view are equally right. If all points of view are equally good, then the point of view that relativism is false could be as good as relativism is true.

Another problem is that there could be judgments that are true but that are never discovered to be so by any investigation.

IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY OF TRUTH

What is the importance of the study of truth for our lives? The theory of truth we choose to accept will affect our perspective, our attitude and also our way of life. Those who accept correspondence theory of truth are normally absolutists and traditionalists. Those who opt for coherence theory of truth are idealists who give more importance to their subjective ideas and convictions. Those who accept pragmatic theory of truth give importance to useful and practical aspects of life. All the other theories are only modifications or combinations of the classical theories.

It is important for us to examine our temperament. Do we give so much importance to objectivity so as to neglect subjectivity? Do our thoughts, words and actions have a human face? Are we fundamentalists who believe that only one theory or point of view can be true; or relativists who hold that anything goes or that all theories are equally true; or pluralists who consider that there may be a plurality of true or right versions of reality? Do we try to compartmentalize life and then create walls between peoples or accept unity in plurality? Are we ready to accept the role of the community in asserting that something is true or false? Truth is essentially dynamic. It emerges in the interaction between subject and object. The criteria of practical success is not enough. We have to combine successful understanding and successful practice. Do we give equal importance to means and ends? The glimpse of truth will become brighter if we approach it with an open mind. Lack of interest and involvement conceals truth to a great extent. Never be satisfied with what we know. Truth reveals itself to those who continue the search and is ready to do the same until death.

Check Your Progress

1. What do you understand by the nature and criteria of truth?

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