

Truth I: Coherence; Pragmatism; Correspondence

Webpage: <https://rjh221.user.srcf.net/courses/truth/>

Our aim here is not to say which things are true; nor to say how we know what is true; the first of those is a task for science, the second for science and epistemology. It's also not directly to answer a certain sort of sceptic who denies that there are any truths, or who denies that we should be concerned with believing them, though these are good philosophical questions (on them see Bernard Williams *Truth and Truthfulness*).

Rather, it is to give an account of what truth is: of what the property of truth (if there is one) consists in, or of what we mean by the predicate 'is true' or the operator 'It is true that'. There are different ways that we could do this. We might give an explicit, eliminative definition, but we might give something weaker, an axiomatization, or an even more circular sketch. Once we have this, it may help us with the task of legitimizing or justifying; or it may show those tasks to be misconceived. But that isn't our primary task here.

A second task, that has dominated much discussion of truth in the last 100 years or so, is to ensure that the account of truth given enables us to say something about the liar:

(1) Sentence (1) is false

which some thinkers have taken to show that the intuitive notion of truth is somehow flawed.

Traditionally accounts start with Aristotle: 'To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what it is that it is, or what is not that it is not, is true.' (*Metaphysics* 1011b25) That sounds ok as far as it goes, but it's a little unclear how far it goes.

Standard accounts of truth have followed various lines: coherence accounts (a sentence is true iff it coheres with ... what? other sentences? other true sentences? or iff it form part of the largest coherent block); pragmatic accounts (what is true is what we will believe at the end of inquiry; or what it is somehow useful to believe; or something like that); correspondence accounts (a sentence or proposition is true iff it corresponds to the facts); and minimalist (or redundancy, or disquotational accounts).

COHERENCE THEORIES AND RELATED APPROACHES

Even if we take coherence as more than just consistency (perhaps consistency + explanatory power or similar), the obvious difficulty is that there can be more than one coherent set of sentences (propositions). So we seem to be pushed immediately into relativism of a particularly unfettered kind. Does it help if we say that to be true is to cohere with our *actual*

beliefs? That still gives us a relativism of truth to our current beliefs; and there is more than one way of coherently extending them.

It is not clear that anybody has really held a coherence theory. Bradley is sometimes held up as an example, but that is controversial. Some think that he really endorsed an identity theory: the idea, roughly, that true propositions *are* facts, and so that they are made true by themselves, hence the idea of *identity* (we'll return to this). Donald Davidson once endorsed a coherence theory, but he later renounced it.

But one of the main motivations for a coherence theory has continued to be influential: the idea that, since we can't, so to speak, get outside our beliefs to see how they compare with the truth, we can't ultimately contrast truth and belief; this has been the motivation behind many pragmatic theories.

PRAGMATIC THEORIES

These are legion. C.S. Peirce: true beliefs are those that will be accepted at 'the end of inquiry'. William James: 'Ideas...become true just in so far as they help us get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience.' Richard Rorty: 'the distinction between justification and truth ... makes no difference to my decisions'.

Some obvious worries: With Peirce: how idealized is the notion of the end of inquiry? If it is heavily idealized, the theory risks losing content; if it isn't, it looks obviously false. With James: is it really plausible that what is helpful is true? Is the universe that cooperative? Two issues with Rorty: (i) even if the distinction between truth and justification makes no difference, does this entail that they are the same thing? Is Rorty embracing something akin to verificationism, i.e. to the doctrine that we can only understand something (in this case a distinction) if we can verify it? (ii) Does it really make no difference? Huw Price: doesn't truth provide a norm of belief and assertion? 'If not-p, then it is incorrect to assert that p; if not-p there are *prima facie* grounds for censure of an assertion that p.' Contrast a community that merely uses language to assert their opinions—they use merely-opinionated assertion, or 'MOA'—who might insist on consistency, but nothing more. (Note though that Price still wants to call himself a pragmatist, because he thinks that truth should be explicated 'in terms of its role in practice'. (Is that enough to qualify him as a pragmatist?)) Like the minimalists, he holds that is no substantial property of truth, but denies that the minimalist can capture the norm of truth; we'll come back to this.)

CORRESPONDENCE THEORIES

Correspondence theories take truth to consist in correspondence. So to say that a certain statement is true is *not* to say the same thing that would be said by that statement (though it may entail that); it is to say that the correspondence relation obtains. This is the focus of what Strawson denies in his response to Austin; and it is also what the minimalist denies. But

it is not clear what we should say about this issue directly. So let's look in more detail at the substance of the correspondence account.

Two obvious questions:

- (i) What is the correspondence between? Sentences? Statements? And Facts? The World?
- (ii) What is correspondence?

Taking the first of these first; can we individuate the facts properly? An argument against comes from the *Slingshot Argument* as given by Davidson, 'True to the Facts'.

Two assumptions: two descriptions 'the fact that p' and 'the fact that q' denote the same fact if (i) 'p' and 'q' are logically equivalent; or (ii) if 'p' and 'q' differ only in that a singular term occurring in 'p' has been replaced with a co-referring singular term in 'q'.

Then by (i), (1) and (2) denote the same fact since they are logically equivalent:

- (1) Snow is white
- (2) (The x, such that x is Putin and snow is white) = (The x, such that x is Putin)

and by (ii) (2) and (3) denote the same fact:

- (2) (The x, such that x is Putin and snow is white) = (The x, such that x is Putin)
- (3) (The x, such that x is Putin and grass is green) = (The x, such that x is Putin)

but then (3) and (4) denote the same fact:

- (3) (The x, such that x is Putin and grass is green) = (The x, such that x is Putin)
- (4) Grass is green

Then by transitivity of identity, (1) and (4) denote the same fact, so there is only one fact.

Is the argument valid? Let's focus first on the move from (2) to (3). Is the idea the Fregean one that 'snow is white' and 'grass is green' both denote the same thing, namely the true. That would certainly make the move from (2) to (3) valid, but in the context of this argument it is surely question begging. Won't the proponent of fine grade facts think that they denote different things, namely different facts?

Instead Davidson's claim seems to be that '(The x, such that x is Putin and snow is white)' and '(The x, such that x is Putin and grass is green)' are both singular terms, denoting Putin, and hence one can be substituted for the other.

But these are definite descriptions. On a Russellian account, these, of course, are not singular terms; and there is no reason to think that substituting co-denoting definite descriptions as Russell understands them will give rise to sentences that express the same fact. Surely the fact that the winner of the 2008 US presidential election was Obama is different to the fact that the winner of the 2012 election was Obama, even though those two descriptions are co-denoting.

Suppose alternatively that we reject the Russellian account, and treat descriptions as singular terms. The problem then is that Davidson's other principle, that logical equivalents express the same fact, seems questionable. The move from (1) to (2), which would be valid on the Russellian account now looks to be a move that does change the subject: from a claim about snow being white, to an identity statement about Putin.

[For those who are really keen on this stuff. Stephen Neale shows (following Gödel) that a somewhat better slingshot argument can be constructed if one replaces assumption (i) with the weaker assumption (i*) that a description will refer to the same fact if "Fa" is substituted for "a = the x such that (x=a and Fx)" and *vice versa* (see Neale *Facing Facts*; for a good summary see John MacFarlane's review of the book in the on-line *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*). But there are still many ways of understanding facts that reject either (i*) or (ii) or both. For instance, this is the case for most truth maker theories: every true sentence must be made true by something, i.e. a fact. Such accounts have their problems (how do we deal with disjunctive facts, or negative existentials?), but the central point here is that they do not seem to be theories of truth at all. Rather, they use a prior understanding of truth to provide a constraint on what makes sentences true.]

Move now to the second issue, that of how to understand correspondence, and to a more general worry: is our grip on a sentence *corresponding* to a fact any different to our grip on it being *made true* by the fact? If not, have we actually got anywhere? For now we are presupposing the notion of truth in defining correspondence, so it cannot be used to define truth without going in a circle.

Hartry Field: rather than looking to correspondence of true sentences to the facts, look for correspondence of names to things, and of predicates to properties, and build truth out of that. ("Tarski's Theory of Truth"). You might try for something like a causal theory of reference for the relation of a name to its referent; and perhaps something analogous for the relation of a predicate to a property. But now the worry about correspondence seems to have been pushed to the issue of what it is for an object to *have* a property. Do we have any independent grip on that? Isn't it just that the property denoted by the corresponding predicate is true of the thing bearing the name.

But if we haven't got a general take on that, maybe we have to think again how to interpret Aristotle's slogan: it is not that, in general, we understand what it is to say of what is that it is, other than it is to be say something true. It is rather that for each thing that we might say, we understand what it is for it to be true. But that takes us towards a different approach.