

Truth II: Coherence; Pragmatism

One approach to the apparent vacuity of correspondence theories is to give a more substantial account of truth. That is what the various theories that Kirkham calls 'nonrealist' try to do. Their primary motivation though is not to give a substantial theory of truth. It is to develop a worry that arose for the empiricists, and that has hung over philosophy since: that we are in no position to get 'outside' our experience, and to conceptualise some external world which it corresponds to. So instead we should somehow construct our idea of truth from within what we have access to. (That is impressionistic and in many cases inaccurate, but I hope you get the idea.) There is a parallel issue for idealists, though here the thought is less that one cannot get independent access to an external world, and more that there isn't one to get access to.

COHERENCE THEORIES

This is normally on the list of standard accounts of truth because Russell put it there, but it hasn't actually been advocated by many people. Proponents are mainly idealists; Bradley is a possible example, though 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* (Hornsby has developed an account along these lines). Some empiricists have also at times held a version for the theory; see for instance, Hempel's "On the Logical Positivists' Theory of Truth", developing ideas from Carnap and Neurath. For a fairly thorough presentation, see the Bladshard, as presented by Kirkham.

Even if we take coherence as more than just consistency (perhaps consistency + explanatory power or similar), one 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*? Or as Hempel puts it, *protocol sentences*. That still gives us a relativism of truth to our current beliefs; and there is more that one way of coherently extending them. This is really a worry about the account being too powerful: it is too ready to count things as true. But there is also a worry that it may leave certain things out: it is unclear that we could ever find reason for concluding whether or not Henry VIII drank more than 50cl of wine on some randomly chosen night in 1531; yet surely either the claim that he did, or that he didn't, is true. This isn't just a point about excluded middle as a logical claim; it is a claim about the completeness of reality.

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? There is lots of psychology suggesting that we habitually believe false things, and that this keeps our spirits up.

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's objection: 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'. (Worry: 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 because they can't get this normative role; we'll come back to this.