

Introduction

Since we have been engaged in an investigation into the nature and limits of knowledge, there is a sense in which truth, like a ghost, has haunted the pages of this book. We cannot understand the nature of knowledge without some reference to the truth; and yet when we turn to examine it explicitly it seems to vanish before our eyes. The question 'What is truth?' looks innocent enough, but we can easily tie ourselves up in knots in trying to answer it.

We begin this chapter by looking at three different theories of truth: **the correspondence theory**, **the coherence theory** and **the pragmatic theory**.

Although none of them is entirely satisfactory, each of them seems to capture a fragment of the 'truth about truth'. We then ask how, if at all, we can know the truth, and whether it makes sense to say that we are getting closer to the truth. Perhaps we can steer between the extremes of dogmatism – the belief that you possess the absolute truth – and relativism – the belief that there is no such truth to possess – by adopting what I call a cubist theory of truth. The thought here is that although absolute truth may lie beyond our grasp, we still need to keep hold of some concept of truth if we are to distinguish between reality and fantasy. There is, after all, a difference between *wishing* that something were true and its actually being true.

The habit of truth may help to discipline our thinking and encourage us to be objective, but disturbing questions remain about whether we should seek the truth at any price. Should we, for example, pursue the truth if it makes people unhappy, or if it can be exploited by the unscrupulous for evil and destructive ends? Since we live in a world of rapid and accelerating technological growth, such questions are of obvious relevance to us.

As we hurtle towards the future, we will need to think very carefully about how to use the knowledge we possess and the extent to which we should pursue it further. Given this, it is perhaps appropriate that we conclude this chapter with a discussion about the nature and value of wisdom.

Correspondence theory

According to the correspondence theory, a statement is true if it corresponds to a fact. For example, the statement 'Grass is green' is true if and only if grass is green; and the statement 'Violets are blue' is true if and only if violets are blue.

At first sight, this 'theory' may strike you as completely trivial. For it appears to be saying nothing more than that a statement is true if and only if it is true. Didn't we already know that? But one of the strengths of the correspondence theory is that it insists that truth depends on how things are in the world, and that a statement is true not because an authority said it was true, or because you happen to feel that it is true, but because it corresponds to something in reality. This belief was a powerful impetus behind the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century which helped to bring about the modern way of looking at the world.

Criticisms

1 Problems with facts

The correspondence theory says that a statement is true if it corresponds to a fact, but we might ask what it means for a fact to exist. The more you think about this question, the more puzzling it becomes. You may feel comfortable about the existence of particular facts, such as 'Paris is the capital of France'. But do you want to say that general facts, such as 'All metals expand when heated', or negative facts, such as 'There are no donkeys on Mars' also exist? If so, *where* do they exist? Does a catalogue of all true facts exist 'out there' or in the mind of God? What about the fundamental laws of physics? Do they exist in addition to the phenomena they describe? Did they exist before the Big Bang? Philosophers spend a lot of time puzzling over these kinds of questions. You may get a better sense of some of the problems we have touched on here from the 'Ghosts' reading at the end of this chapter.

2 Correspondence is never perfect

Since there is a gap between language and the world, correspondence can never be perfect. To see the point, look back at the picture in Chapter 1, 'The Treason of Images' (page 7). What does the picture show? A pipe! So why did Magritte write underneath it 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe' ('This is not a pipe')? Well, because it is not really a pipe, but only a picture of a pipe. You can't smoke the picture! As we saw in Chapter 3, what is true of pictures is equally true of language. You can describe something in as much detail as you like, but the truth described can never match up to the truth experienced, and the map of true propositions can never capture the underlying richness of the world.

Given this, perhaps we should abandon the idea that truth is an all-or-nothing concept – either a statement corresponds to reality or it does not – and think instead of there being *degrees of truth*. For, although there can never be a perfect correspondence, some statements, pictures and maps are surely more accurate than others. And if they are accurate enough for the purposes we have in mind, we might reasonably call them 'true'.

3 Truth cannot be determined in isolation

A final criticism of the correspondence theory is that it is not possible to determine the truth or falsity of a proposition in isolation from other propositions. You might say, 'Surely I can test the truth of a proposition such as "There is a snake in the cellar" by simply going down to the cellar and looking?' But it is always possible that your eyes are deceiving you. As we saw in our discussion of perception in Chapter 4, the only way of determining whether or not something is an illusion is to see how what you think you see fits in with other things that you believe to be true.

Activity 14.1

How, if at all, might the following propositions be said to correspond to facts about reality? What problems are there with them?

- a The cat is on the mat.
- b All metals expand when heated.
- c Pigs do not have wings.
- d Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria was assassinated in August 1914.
- e Random torture is wrong.
- f The *Mona Lisa* is a beautiful painting.

Coherence theory

According to the coherence theory of truth, a proposition is true if it fits in with our overall set of beliefs. In contrast to the correspondence theory, the focus here is not so much on *going and looking* as on *sitting and thinking*. Such an approach is particularly appropriate in the case of knowledge by testimony. In a criminal trial, for example, there is no question of checking up on what the various witnesses say by literally 'going and looking' – for the events to which they relate are in the past. All you can do is to see how coherent the evidence is, and whether or not it all points in the same direction. If at the end of a trial you are willing to say that the accused is guilty, then you presumably think the evidence is compelling enough to establish the truth.

As we saw above, coherence also plays a role in establishing the truth of empirical propositions. If, for example, someone claims to have seen a shark in Lake Geneva, you might reason that this has to be false because sharks live in salt water and Lake Geneva is a fresh-water lake. As this example shows, coherence is particularly effective as a negative test of truth and means that we don't have to waste time checking up on every wild belief we come across. If, for example, someone told me that Elvis Presley is alive and well and living in Scunthorpe, I would reject this claim on the grounds that there is documentary evidence to show that he died in August 1977. Elvis may live on in the hearts of his fans, but he is not living on in Scunthorpe.

Criticisms

1 Coherence is not sufficient for truth

Although coherence may be a good negative test of truth, it does not seem to be such a good positive test. More formally, we can say that, while coherence may be a necessary condition for truth, it does not seem to be a *sufficient* one. For example, although a work of fiction may be coherent, that does not make it true. Shakespeare's play *Richard III*, loosely based on the English king of that name, makes perfect sense, but it is not the historical truth. The same can be said of Oliver Stone's movie, *JFK*, about the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963.

2 Coherence cannot exclude crazy beliefs

If you use a bit of ingenuity, it is possible to make even the most outlandish theory seem coherent. You could, for example, make the flat earth theory consistent with the fact that the Apollo astronauts saw that the earth was round by simply claiming that the space missions were faked in a Hollywood studio. (This is precisely what the International Flat Earth Research Society does!)

Activity 14.2

Devise absurd but coherent explanations for each of the following.

- a The movement of the sun across the sky
- b Insomnia
- c The price of stocks and shares
- d The assassination of John F. Kennedy
- e Global warming
- f The variety of species on the planet

3 Coherence can lead to complacency

The coherence theory can lead to a kind of intellectual complacency which leads you to reject anything that does not fit in with your way of looking at things. But just because something does not fit in with your way of looking at things does not mean that it is false – for it may be your way of looking that needs to be changed. If, for example, a racist comes across evidence which contradicts his prejudice that immigrants are lazy, he should not – as the coherence theory appears to suggest – reject the evidence; rather he should change his world view. The point is that, painful as it may be, we sometimes need to question our assumptions and change our way of looking at the world.

Activity 14.3

How might our discussion in Chapter 8 (pages 226–8), of the role played by anomalies in bringing about scientific revolutions, count against the coherence theory of truth?

Pragmatic theory

According to the pragmatic theory of truth, a proposition is true if it is *useful* or *works in practice*. This theory takes a down-to-earth approach to truth and might seem to cut through a lot of nonsense. Rather than worry about whether ghostly negative facts exist or how to deal with coherent fictions, all that is required to see if an idea is true is to put it to work in the world. Pragmatists often speak of the 'cash value' of a statement, and what interests them is the difference a statement's being true or false makes in practice. You might think of this as an engineer's approach to truth: if the bridge does not fall down, then the principles on which it was built must be true!

Since people are often convinced of the truth of something if it works in practice, the pragmatic theory would seem to be on the right track. While scientists have enabled us to put men on the moon, build computers and cure diseases, astrologers, witch-doctors and faith-healers have been much less successful in helping us to achieve our goals. According to William James (1842–1910), one of the founders of the pragmatic theory, ‘an idea is true so long as to believe it is profitable to our lives’. With reference to religious belief, James argued that ‘if the hypothesis of God works satisfactorily in the widest sense of the word, it is true’.

Activity 14.4

- 1 How would you try to test whether the ‘hypothesis of God’ works in practice? What do you think it would mean for such a belief to work?
- 2 What would (a) the correspondence theory, and (b) the coherence theory say must be the case for the proposition ‘God exists’ to be true?

Criticisms

1 A statement can be useful but not true and true but not useful

There are many examples of statements that are useful but not true:

- There are all kinds of ‘rules of thumb’ in mathematics and science which are useful but not true. For example, Newton’s laws of motion are useful for making day-to-day calculations, but since they only approximate to Einstein’s theory of relativity a physicist will tell you that they are not strictly speaking true.
- It is often socially useful to hold beliefs that match those of other people. If, for example, you had grown up in Nazi Germany it would have been ‘useful’ to have racist beliefs. But the fact that such beliefs might have been good for your ‘career’ would not justify our calling them true!
- At a personal level, there are many statements that would be useful to believe in the sense that they would make us happy but which are not true. My belief that I am a deeply misunderstood genius may make me happy, but the sad reality might be that I am simply a deeply deluded mediocrity.

On the other side of the coin, there are also many examples of statements that we want to say are true but which are not useful.

- At an abstract level, a great deal of mathematics is useless in the sense that it has no practical application. (The mathematician G. H. Hardy, 1877–1947, proudly boasted that he had ‘never done anything useful’.)
- More prosaically, there are literally millions of trivial facts which do not seem to do any useful work. For example, how useful is it to know that Sweden came 10th in the 1965 Eurovision Song Contest with a song called ‘Absent Friends’, or that David Beckham’s father-in-law is called Tony Adams? Such gobbets of useless information are good only for trivia quizzes and game shows – but they are still true.
- There are also many ‘inconvenient truths’ about ourselves and other people which may not be very useful to believe, but which are nevertheless true.

- 1 Classify each of the following beliefs according to whether you think they are: (i) true and useful; (ii) true but not useful; (iii) useful but not true; (iv) not useful and not true. What does this suggest about the pragmatic theory of truth?
 - a John Lennon's first girlfriend was called Thelma Pickles.
 - b If a French noun ends with the suffix '-ion', then it is feminine.
 - c I am a very sociable person with a good sense of humour.
 - d John Smith has exactly 113,574 hairs on his head.
 - e After we are dead we will soon be forgotten.
 - f You should never talk to strangers.
 - g $2 + 2 = 4$.
 - h Santa Claus is watching you to see if you are good or bad.
 - i Human beings have free-will.
 - j If you take cocaine your teeth will drop out.
 - k I am surrounded by people who love and care for me.
 - l We are fighting a just war and have God on our side.
 - m We were all put on the earth for a reason and each of us has a special talent that makes us unique.
 - n Anyone can make it in this country if they work hard enough.
- 2 Imagine you are an astronomer and that you have just discovered that a meteorite will hit the earth in twelve hours' time, wiping out life as we know it. How useful is this truth? Would you announce it to the world or keep this information to yourself?

2 The pragmatic theory implies that two contradictory beliefs could both be true

For example, while a Buddhist believes that the Buddha is the highest source of spiritual authority, a Christian believes that role is played by Jesus. Since these beliefs contradict one another they cannot both be true, but if they make their respective adherents happy, a pragmatist seems committed to saying that they are *both* true.

3 'Useful' and 'works in practice' are too vague to give us a workable theory of truth

A final criticism of the pragmatic theory is that it is not clear what it means to say that something is 'useful' or 'works in practice'. Perhaps a belief is useful if it gives us a feeling of power or security, or makes us feel happy. But then, as we saw above, many statements we naturally want to call true do not seem to be useful in this sense.

You might try to defend the pragmatic theory by pointing out that a statement which is useful in the short-run might not be useful in the long-run. If, for example, you have an exaggerated belief in your own abilities, it might be good for your self-esteem in the short-run but it will not ultimately help you to cope with reality. The most useful thing in the long-run is surely to have a realistic grasp of your own strengths and weaknesses.

The trouble with adopting this broader sense of 'useful' is that it seems to rob the pragmatic theory of its value. We said that a statement is useful if it enables us to cope with reality; but if we then ask what kinds of statement enable us to cope with reality, we naturally want to say: statements that are true. This is surely an example of **circular reasoning** – explaining A in terms of B, and B in terms of C, and C in terms of A. The pragmatic theory now seems to come down to little more than sticking the label 'useful' on statements that we have decided for independent reasons are true, and 'not useful' on ones that we have decided are false.

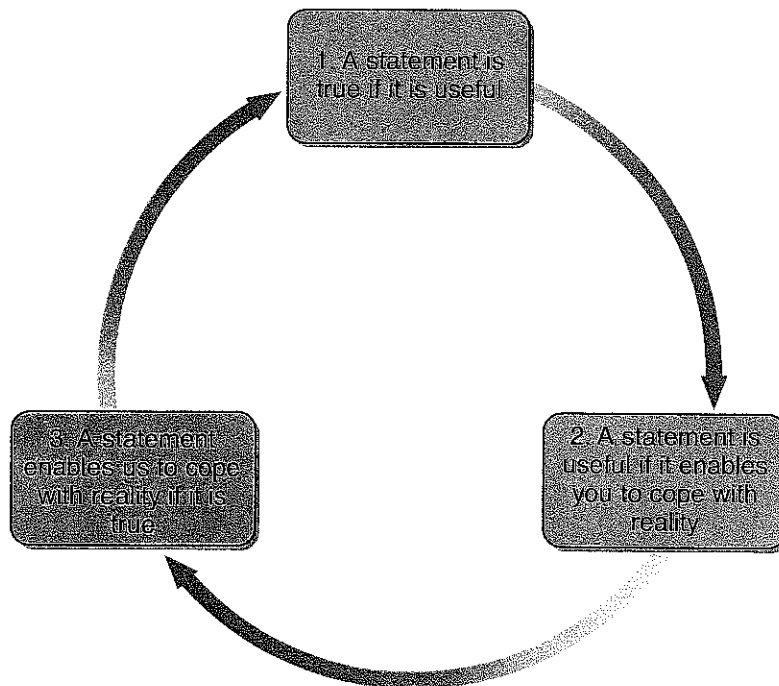


Figure 14.1 Circular reasoning

The common-sense conclusion which fits the way we naturally think is that it is not usefulness that makes a statement true, but truth that makes a statement useful. In other words, *usefulness is not a criterion of truth as the pragmatic theory claims, but a consequence of it.*

Activity 14.6

- 1 Give some examples of statements that might be useful in the short-run, but not in the long-run.
- 2 Do you think that someone could inhabit a comfortable illusion for their whole life without ever being let down by it? What are the implications of this for our discussion?
- 3 What are the benefits and drawbacks of modern technology? What do you think a Buddhist monk would say about its usefulness? What, if anything, does this imply about the truth of the scientific theories on which technology is based?
- 4 When a religious person says 'God exists' do you think they are saying any more than 'It is useful to believe that God exists'? If so, what?

Summary of theories

We have now looked at three different theories of truth and have found that, despite their attractions, they each have various weaknesses. These can be summarised in the table below.

Theory	Criticisms
Correspondence A proposition is true if it corresponds to a fact	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1 The correspondence theory requires the existence of all kinds of ghostly facts to which true statements are supposed to correspond.2 Since there is a gap between language and the world, correspondence can never be perfect.3 We cannot determine the truth or falsity of a proposition in isolation from other propositions.
Coherence A proposition is true if it fits in with our overall set of beliefs	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1 Coherence is not sufficient for truth. A fairy tale may be perfectly coherent, but it is still a fairy tale.2 With a little ingenuity, any crazy belief can be made to appear coherent.3 A knowledge claim that does not fit in with your way of thinking might still be true.
Pragmatic A proposition is true if it is useful or works in practice	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1 A proposition can be true but not useful, and useful but not true.2 The pragmatic theory implies that two contradictory beliefs could both be true.3 The words 'useful' and 'works in practice' are too vague to get us very far.

Perhaps we should try to combine the above theories to make a three-part test of truth. We might then say that a theory is true if it reflects the facts, is coherent, and works in practice by, for example, enabling us to make good predictions.

Can we know the truth?

The three-part test of truth suggested above may be an effective way of distinguishing between truth and falsity in everyday life; but at a deeper level you might still have doubts about whether we can know the truth. When we think about truth, it is hard to avoid the idea that a true proposition must correspond to reality. The trouble is that, since we can never escape from our own distinctively human way of looking at things, we can in practice never compare our picture of reality with reality itself to see if our picture is true. The point in short is that *our picture of the world is always an interpretation and we can never be sure that our interpretation is true.*