

How Do You Know What You Believe Is True? Theories of Truth

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July 23, 2018



How do you know what you believe is true? This is a difficult question.

If there were a definitive answer, we would probably not have myriad belief systems today. It is ironic that, while people hold mutually exclusive, logically incompatible claims and beliefs, each is often convinced of its exclusive superiority over others.

Suppose you asked a believer: "How do you know what you believe is true?" He or she may cite their experiences as evidence, or give several theoretical

reasons, or refer to highly selective scientific findings. The problem is those who hold an opposite view can give plausible "evidence" and cite opposite scientific findings to validate their claims and beliefs.

What makes certain claims and beliefs truer than others?

Here, I explain four main theories of truth as conceptual tools for assessment: 1) correspondence theory of truth; 2) coherence theory of truth; 3) pragmatic theory of truth; and, 4) existential theory of truth.



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Although Unificationism presents itself as "new truth" (in the Introduction of *Exposition of the Divine Principle*), there is no systematic explication of the concept of truth in religious as well as philosophical texts (such as Unification Thought). Since Unificationism claims its teachings to be the "unity of science and religion," clarification of its concept of truth is necessary.

Correspondence Theory of Truth

The first view is to see truth as the correspondence, agreement or accordance between ideas/concepts/statements and reality/states of affairs. This position often presupposes an objective reality or independent existence of truth. In this model, because you posit reality as something that exists independent of or

outside of your perception/judgment, you conceive your ideas/judgments as a sort of picture or mirror image of reality.

Religion and science are ways to reach reality. This is done through revelation and experiences in religion and observation and experimentation in science. The goal is to capture an accurate, neutral mirror image of reality free from interpretation.

The problem of this model is whether there is such a thing that can be called objective, and interpretation-free reality. Is human understanding/perception necessarily interpretive and limited by its perspective and framework of interpretation? Is language, which forms concepts/ideas/thoughts, necessarily conditioned by society, culture and history?

Science and interpretation

Modern science emerged as a method to present objective reality free from interpretation, bias, and prejudice. Francis Bacon (1561–1626) presented the experimental method as a way to free us from "idols" in his *Novum Organum* (New Organon). Descartes used reason to portray an accurate picture of the world and free us from biases and misconceptions. The Enlightenment thinkers held interpretation-free, objective, neutral knowledge to be the ideal of knowledge and found modern science as a way to realize such an ideal.

Physics was a leading science for the development of modern science. Physics appeared to be more rigorous, accurate, and "solid" than other "soft" sciences. It is, however, contemporary physics that called the traditional concept of physical materiality as reality into question. Elementary particles are not solid, unaffected forms of existence independent of observation. Rather, observation affects the "reality" of elementary particles. Furthermore, the complementarity of elementary particles as both wave and particle demands interpretation.

Philosophers of science also recognized the theory-loadedness of observation and data. There is no such thing as theory-free or interpretation-free "neutral" or "pure" data. The amount of voltage, amperes, for example, presupposes electromagnetic theory, without which such data are meaningless. "Objective reality" is not independent but dependent on a theory.

The strength of the correspondence theory of truth is its closeness to ordinary life experiences. For example, when you see a small animal jumping around in your garden, you may think it was a rabbit. If it turns out the animal is in fact a rabbit, your belief or perception is true.

Within this framework, we often see truth, facts, and reality as similar and interchangeable. A deeper problem emerges, however, when we try to universalize this concept of truth, which involves both ontological and epistemological issues. If we posit that objective reality is the basis against which to check the truthfulness of our ideas/perceptions, the issue then is how to reach reality.

If we rely on science as the way to reach reality, we face the same problem of how do we know whether reality as depicted by a particular scientific theory is the ultimate reality? Isn't reality as depicted by a particular scientific theory just another image within a given theory? No matter how many theories we adopt, we always encounter the problem of reaching the final form of reality. Reality in the correspondence theory of truth is like an ever-receding horizon.

If we assume an ultimate reality, is it possible to reach such a thing-in-itself? If our knowledge is limited by perspective, framework of thinking, categories of perception/thought, and language, the acts of assuming and positing such a thing-in-itself may be a mistaken approach. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) distinguished the thing-in-itself ("noumena") and "phenomena" by arguing the former is "unknowable" and the latter is the limit of what we can know. Hence, for Kant, the existence of God and other things-in-themselves are not reachable by any cognitive attempt. He rejected traditional "proofs of the existence of God" and presented the whole argument for the existence of God within a moral sphere. Kant's thesis is that the "thing-in-itself is unknowable." If you accept his thesis, the correspondence theory of knowledge cannot be extended to the "thing-in-itself."

The meaning of being is contextual. It is determined by its relation to its context. When we try to understand the "reality" of each being, we use fact-finding or reality-checking mechanisms to see if our beliefs/perceptions/ideas match the reality of any given social, cultural context. The correspondence theory of truth works well in ordinary life spheres.

Nevertheless, the reality of being begins to appear differently when we try to see and understand it within various disciplines. Since our search for the reality of beings is an ongoing quest and context is always expanding, there is no final reality. Since our quest for knowledge is a never-ending search, seeking the true reality can certainly be a part of the concept of truth.

In other words, the concept of truth can include an element of an unreachable goal like an ever-receding horizon we seek for eternity. If we interpret the correspondence theory of truth as a guide for the pursuit of truth ("regulative" use in Kantian theory), then it works well. Or if we apply this theory to obvious matters in daily life, it works. If we apply it to complex matters such as an ultimate reality or physical reality or anything that requires interpretation, it starts showing problems.

In daily life, we share a common basic assumption. So we do not have to look into our framework of interpretation. When we deal with complex matters, however, the issue of our interpretive framework surfaces. I argue there is no such thing as uninterpreted human understanding. The correspondence theory of truth is an articulation of a truth-validation mechanism for daily matters where we do not have to look into the framework of interpretation we share in common.



Coherence Theory of Truth

The second concept of truth is the coherence theory of truth. When we examine a truth-claim, we see its overall coherence, the logical consistency of a cluster of ideas, assumptions, experiences, observations, and other components/conditions that constitute the claim. Be it science or religion, we often determine the plausibility of truth-claims by how constitutive elements such as assumptions, theories, observations, and data fit together. Among a

cluster of established theories, we also check the consistency and coherence of a new theory with other established theories.

The advantage of this theory is its wide range of applicability to any interpretative theory without ontological commitment, without positing any true reality. If a theory can explain the issues well, you do not have to make an assumption if there is a true reality or one true objective principle.

The problem of this theory is the lack of a mechanism to assess theories that are equally consistent and coherent. Furthermore, we can have a logically consistent and coherent fictitious theory created out of imagination or fantasy. Even in the field of religion, this theory cannot assess diverse belief systems if it is used as a singular standard of assessment.

Consider two religious belief systems that may be mutually exclusive and logically incompatible. For example, Judeo-Christian belief systems hold the thesis of the existence of Creator God, whereas Zen Buddhism rejects this. On the question of the existence of God, one says "yes" and the other says "no." Nevertheless, each has some consistent and coherent explanations on existential questions, such as the problem of suffering, evil, and others.

On the question of the creation of Adam and Eve, original sin, and redemption, Christian belief systems affirm them as all real and true. These concepts have no meaning within the Zen belief system; salvation (Enlightenment) is possible without a savior or without referencing sin or other concepts. Nevertheless, each belief system has a certain coherence and consistency. There are a myriad of belief systems in the world that have a certain degree of coherence and consistency. As Karl Popper (1902-94) pointed out, religious or quasi-religious systems can never be refuted because they can add *ad hoc* hypotheses in order to retain theoretical coherence/consistency whenever they encounter an anomaly or counter-evidence.

The Divine Principle (DP) stresses the coherence and consistency of its interpretation of biblical narratives in order to establish its truthfulness over other interpretations in Christian theologies. The DP, however, strives for the unity of science and religion, extending the criteria of coherence and consistency beyond theological systems to scientific knowledge. The DP has to seriously examine itself if it is seeking to establish a coherent and consistent belief system that encompasses social, human, and natural sciences.

Pragmatic Theory of Truth

Under the pragmatic theory of truth, truth is defined in terms of practical effects of a claim. Consider a person who claims to have received the revelation that he or she is the Messiah of humankind. How do we assess the claim? How do we know if the person in fact had a revelation or not? It can be wishful thinking, a hallucination, a dream, or even a lie or made-up story. No one has access to another person's mind. The pragmatic theory of truth looks to the personal and social effects of the claim. The claim of Messiahship can be assessed by the positive effects it had on the person, others, and human history. This theory takes a contextual approach and examines the claim by looking to its effects on personal, social, historical, and other contexts.

The strength of this theory is its wide range of application. It is applicable to a variety of theories in science and religion and claims of individuals and groups. The theory's weakness is its dependence on other assessment mechanisms and criteria, such as social values, where there can be conflicting value judgments. For example, how does one assess the claims of Martin Luther? From a Catholic point of view, he was a troublemaker. From the Protestant point of view, he was sent by God to begin a new religious movement.

In order to supplement the weakness of this theory, we need to identify a basic value perspective across belief systems and scientific endeavors. If we could identify a set of values as the basis of assessment, we can use it as the criteria to assess belief systems. Believers tend to derive values from belief systems. Believing something to be true, however, does not make the belief true at all. It can just be wishful thinking or a group fantasy. From a pragmatic perspective, religious belief systems can be assessed in terms of positive personal transformation and social change. To make the pragmatic theory work, we need to broaden our value perspective and identify common values across humanity.

Linguistic Approach, the Existential Concept of Truth, and Others

Linguistic Approach

The concept of truth is an inherent part of each philosophy. Philosophers in the analytic tradition, dominant in Anglo-American institutions, defined philosophy as a discourse within the limit of language. When you examine the concept of truth within the boundaries of linguistic analyses, the issue of truth is the question of the meaning of statements/claims. All types of theories of truth -- that is, the correspondence of statements/claims with reality, the logical consistency of claims, and their pragmatic effects -- can be examined within the boundaries of language.

Analytic philosophers see the misuse of language as the root cause of philosophical problems. Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) took this approach and inspired a whole tradition of analytic philosophy. From his perspective, metaphysical issues in philosophy are "pseudo problems" due to the confused uses of language. For example, when we invent some terms and give names, we tend to think they are real; naming leads us to believe the reality of that which is named. Wittgenstein's approach is to get away from this metaphysical orientation, and direct one's approach to logical analysis of how we use language. Within this approach, "truth" does not have any metaphysical/ontological connotation.

Existential Approach, and Others

Does language define the limits of the world, at least, the limits of what you can see, understand, think, and experience? Since our experiences are interpreted by our conceptual mechanism, the linguistic approach has some plausibility. The question is if there are extra-linguistic experiences or states of affairs?

In religious traditions, experiential approaches are quite common. They often point to existential, transformative experiences; some understand phenomena of truth not as discrete human activity, such as cognition, but as a matter of existential transformation which involves the whole way of how one exists. For example, consider Enlightenment in Zen. The realization of Buddhist truth, Enlightenment, is possible only as a transformative experience.

Mystics in diverse religious traditions also point to the transformative experience with the divine, the experience of the total oneness of the self and the cosmos, or the experience of the interconnectedness of all beings in the universe. They argue such experiential knowledge is inexpressible by any conceptual means; it can be symbolically or metaphorically illustrated by poetic expressions or by analogy. Language has a poetic function as well as a logical function. Conceptual understanding is primarily carried out by the latter. Poetry, however, often depicts a truth beyond what a conceptual or logical understanding can explain.

The existential notion of truth is also expressed as the embodiment of truth. Under this view, a human being is not simply a cognitive subject who grasps truth as an object. A human being rather becomes the embodiment of truth. Jesus' words in John 14:6, "I am the...truth," is an example of such a notion of truth. Here, truth is not seen as some kind of property or object one can have or lose. Truth is an existential matter that describes the way of life or the way of being. This approach views truth not as a "static" object of knowledge but as a working principle in practice.

The weakness of this view is that you can have some transformative or existential experiences in almost any religious practices. Once an individual has some transformative/existential experience, s/he is easily convinced of its truthfulness. This is why there are myriad religious beliefs and ardent believers are convinced of the exclusive superiority of their belief systems. In some sense, an individual is easily "trapped" by a particular religion or sect one happens to encounter, and transformative experiences give conviction to whatever belief system a group provides.

Integral Approach to Truth in Unificationism

Each view of truth has its advantages and disadvantages. What is the best approach and why should we take such an approach? Truth manifests in various phases. When you posit reality as an object, you capture truth as the correspondence of ideas/statements/claims with an object/state of affairs. When you try to comprehend something, some coherence or consistency appears and makes the issue at hand meaningful and comprehensible. You may also have transformative experience through some teachings. When we face practical effects, we are compelled to recognize the pragmatic value of a given event.

Thus, phenomena of truth appear in multiple spheres: the objective sphere (correspondence theory of truth), sphere of human understanding (coherence theory of truth), sphere of transformative experience (transformative experience or embodiment of truth), and social, cultural spheres (pragmatic theory of truth). Each theory of truth seems to be a conceptualization of the phenomena of truth.

Because such division is built into the way our language is structured, we can approach the whole analysis from the perspective of language. From a philosophical perspective, the basic categories of thinking (being, knowing, valuing, acting, and others) design our thought in such a way as to guide our comprehension. According to the type of inquiry and one's approach, a certain type of truth is highlighted.

What, then, is the Unificationist perspective? I argue for a multi-dimensional approach. In order to capture the phenomena of truth in its full scope, we can examine it in terms of the multiple criteria presented in those theories of truth. The judgment of truth is a synthetic act that balances the plausibility of claims in multiple spheres. No single theory of truth is perfect. There may be contradictions, inconsistencies, lack of evidence, and other flaws among claims. By complementing each other, we strive for the best possible framework of interpretation.

Interpretation is an ongoing quest rather than a finished work. Through the synergy of multiple approaches, Unificationism itself will have to be reinterpreted again and again. Such dynamism can open up a new horizon of interpretation. Is it possible to derive a comprehensive integral approach to truth from Unificationism? This is an open question yet to be explored.

This article is adapted from the author's forthcoming book tentatively-titled Multi-dimensional Hermeneutics and Unification Thought.

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