

Metaphysics & Epistemology

Truth (I)

The concept of truth

- We shall deal with the concept we use when calling a view, a sentence, an assertion, etc. true.

e.g. “It is raining in Paris”

- We shall not deal with the concept that words like ‘true’ express when they mean ‘real’

e.g. “Alice is a true friend”

Correspondence theories of truth

- Correspondence theories of truth say, in a typical form, that a sentence is true iff it corresponds to a fact.

e.g. “the Earth rotates”

e.g. “Athens is the capital of Greece”

- Generally, each fact is *the fact that*
- It is generally accepted that facts are things other than events

Correspondence theories of truth

- Those theories ought to explain:
 - what kind of entities facts are
 - what the correspondence consists in.
- Also, in order not to define truth circularly, they must explain facts and correspondence without using the concept of truth.

e.g. they must not say that facts are the entities that render some sentences true and others false

e.g. they must not say that correspondence is the relation that obtains between a true sentence and the fact that renders it true.

Frege's argument

- Correspondence theories of truth also ought to tackle an argument that G. Frege formulated against them:

In order for there to be a correspondence between two entities, they must coincide like banknotes of the same value, yet a true sentence and something real usually cannot coincide in that sense, as they are very different entities.

e.g. Banknotes of the same value have the same number of parts — lines and colour patches — and the same organization of those parts.

Wittgenstein's theory

- One correspondence theory of truth is the theory we find in Wittgenstein's Tractatus about the so-called elementary sentences.
- According to it, a **fact** consists in the existence of one or more states of affairs, and a state of affairs consists in some simple (not composite) objects combined in some way.
- An **elementary sentence**, is made up of names combined in some way. These names are names of simple objects. The elementary sentence presents a state of affairs: those objects' being arranged in the way in which the names are arranged within the sentence.

Wittgenstein's theory

- An *elementary sentence* is not like an *ordinary sentence*.
- An *elementary sentence* is something like a picture of a state of affairs: the sentence has as many constituents as the state of affairs, and the constituents of the one are structured just like the constituents of the other. But, unlike ordinary pictures, this common structure is not a spatial structure, but more abstract.
- The correspondence between the sentence and the state of affairs is analogous to the correspondence between banknotes of the same value, but there are also differences. One difference is that, in the banknotes, the parts of the one are not names of the parts of the other.
- The *elementary sentence* is true iff the corresponding state of affairs exists, that is, constitutes a fact.

Wittgenstein's theory

- A word or phrase is a *connective* iff it can take one or more sentences, e.g. the sentences 'The Sun revolves round the Earth' and 'The Earth rotates', and yield a more composite sentence:
'The Sun revolves round the Earth or the Earth rotates'.
- The connective is truth-functional provided the truth-values of the sentences it takes determine the truth-value of the sentence it yields.
- There are two truth-values: truth and falsity
- As for any *ordinary sentence*, it admits of a full analysis, which will reduce it to many elementary sentences connected by means of truth-functional connectives, such as 'and', 'or', 'not', etc., although we may not be able to carry out that analysis.

How did Wittgenstein end up with that theory?

- It seems that his problem was to explain how it can be that some sounds that come out of our mouths, or some marks on a paper, concern things and situations beyond themselves.
- It seems that the only explanation he could think of is that the sounds or marks should, at least at bottom, have a pictorial character.

Problems & limitations

- The theory was highly original, but faced serious problems.
- One was that Wittgenstein was not able to find any examples of elementary sentences (nor any examples of simple objects). No ordinary sentence consists of names only, and none is something like a picture. So, it seems excessively bold to say that ordinary sentences admit of an analysis that will reduce them to elementary ones.

Problems & limitations

- An additional problem is that, according to Wittgenstein, ordinary sentences, in their analysed form, will consist of elementary sentences combined with one another only by means of connectives that are truth-functional. Yet our languages possess many a mechanism for producing composite sentences which is not definable in terms of truth-functional connectives;

e.g. the phrases ‘... believes that ...’ and ‘... knows that ...’ are such mechanisms.

Austin's theory

- Another correspondence theory of truth is the one we find in Austin.
- Austin distinguishes between sentences and statements.
- In his view, when we make a statement using a sentence, there are some conventions (“demonstrative conventions”) which connect the statement with a situation in the world (a fact), and there are also other conventions (“descriptive conventions”) which connect the sentence with a type of situations.
- The statement is true iff the situation is of that type.

Austin's theory

E.g., being at home and talking about my cat, I say 'The cat is on the mat'.

- The demonstrative conventions connect my statement with a situation that is to do with the relative position of a certain cat and a certain mat at a given moment.
- The sentence I used can be used by someone making another statement, that is, talking about another cat or another mat or another moment in time.
- The descriptive conventions connect the sentence with the common type of all the situations that consist in a cat on a mat.

Austin's theory

- In Austin, the statement, which is made through use of the sentence, is true provided we have the following correspondence between the statement and the situation that the demonstrative conventions connect with it: just as the statement is one of the statements that can be made through use of the given sentence, so the situation is one of the situations of the type that the descriptive conventions connect with the sentence.
- This correspondence is not analogous to the correspondence between banknotes of the same value.

Problems & limitations

- One problem for Austin's theory is that it fits some sentences (such as 'It's raining today') but not others.
- In particular, it does not fit sentences that do not contain expressions (like 'today' or 'this cat') whose reference in the world varies with the circumstances in which they are used.

E.g., if we say 'Every person has some friends', it doesn't seem that we can make Austin's distinction between a situation (which is connected with the use of the sentence in the specific circumstances) and a type of situations (which is connected with the sentence in general).

Coherence theory of truth

- The coherentist view about truth says, in a typical form, that a sentence is true iff it is contained in a comprehensive, broad, set of sentences that has internal coherence.

E.g., the sentence ‘The Earth revolves round the Sun’ is true because it is contained in a broad and coherent set of sentences that concern the properties of the heavenly bodies in question, the observations that have been made of those objects, and the reliability of these observations.

Coherence theory of truth

- A set of sentences is *comprehensive* provided it concerns many aspects of reality or, at least, many aspects of the same topic. Variants of the coherentist view were adopted by the neo-Hegelians (late 19th – early 20th century) and the logical positivists (in the interwar period).
- Some philosophers, such as B. Russell, wondered if the coherentist view puts forward a definition of truth or a criterion of it. If we want to define truth, we are seeking a feature (of sentences, beliefs, etc.) which, on the one hand, is identical with it and, on the other, is formulated without use of terms such as ‘true’ and the like.

Coherence theory of truth

If we want to find a criterion of truth, we are seeking a feature f which is not identical with it, but is such that:

1. all or most of the sentences, beliefs, etc. that are true have the feature f , and all or most of those that have f are true, and
2. in at least some cases, finding out if something has the feature f is easier than directly finding out if it is true.

Likewise, the characteristic spots of measles are not identical with measles, but are a criterion of the ailment. If the coherentist view puts forward a criterion, it is compatible with the correspondence theories.

Coherence theory of truth

- Historically, some coherentists (like B. Blanshard) offered the view as a definition
- Other coherentists (like the neo-Hegelian F. Bradley) offered it as a criterion and thought of truth as some kind of correspondence with reality.
- Philosophers in the latter group ought to explain why belonging to a broad and coherent set is a criterion of truth if truth consists in correspondence. Bradley's explanation was that reality is an exceptionally coherent whole (each aspect of it involves all other aspects), so coherence in a broad set of sentences is a sign that the sentences are true.

Coherence theory of truth

- Many adherents of coherentism did not make Russell's distinction themselves, but had ended up with that view through their effort to find criteria for truth.
- Logical positivists initially emphasized that truth is correspondence, but later turned to variants of the coherentist view as they were trying to find tests with which we can check if a sentence is true.
- R. Carnap and M. Schlick considered that, for sentences that describe our current perceptual experience (e.g. 'At this moment, I see something blue'), we can directly find out if they are true, but we can test the other sentences only by checking them for compatibility, as well as for other logical relations, with the verified sentences of the first category.
- O. Neurath, going further, considered that in order to test any sentence for truth, the only thing we can do is check if it is contained in a coherent set of sentences that is also as comprehensive as possible.

Problems for coherentism

- Coherentists ought to clarify what the coherence relation consists in. They may say that a set of sentences is coherent iff the sentences are compatible, that is, iff they jointly describe a logically possible situation. Instead, they may say that compatibility is not sufficient for a set of sentences to be coherent. Neo-Hegelians said the sentences also needed to make up a system of valid syllogisms.
- It appears that, according to the coherentist view, some sentence-sets that contradict one another are true. Let's take, e.g., the Euclidean geometry and the non-Euclidean geometries. Each one is a broad set of sentences that are both compatible and organized into a system of valid syllogisms. But it cannot be that all geometries are true.

Problems for coherentism

- More generally, the coherentist view seems to pronounce all sentences true. This problem was raised by Russell. If we consider that compatibility is enough for a set of sentences to possess coherence, we can say that each sentence is contained in a broad and coherent set of sentences.
- Russell gave the example of the respectable bishop Stubbs, who died in his bed; the sentence 'Stubbs was hanged for murder' is contained in a broad set of sentences that (even though no one formulated all of them together) jointly describe a logically possible situation. But even if we follow a stricter sense of 'coherent', it still seems probable that, for any sentence s , there is a broad set of sentences which is coherent in that sense and contains s .