

Tok help



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

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 true not because an authority said it was true, or because you happen to feel that it 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 law 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 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??™ . What does the picture show A pipe! So why did Magritte write underneath it ??? Ce??|.

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. First, 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 you believe to be true. 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 came 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

<https://assignbuster.com/tok-help/>

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 3, 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 mission were faked in a Hollywood studio. 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. 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, 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”.

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 law of motion are useful for making day-today calculations, but since they only approximate to Einstein’s theory of relativity a physicist will tell you that they are not strictly speaking true. 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 2.

The pragmatic theory implies that two contradictory beliefs could 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.

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.

The limitations of our knowledge tools
The idea that we are in some sense trapped inside our own interpretation of reality would seem to be supported by our discussion in Part 2 of the four knowledge tools: perception, language, reason and emotion.

As we saw, these knowledge tools play an important role in helping us to construct a workable map of reality, but it could be argued that they also limit our ability to know the truth. Are we getting closer to the truth
Despite the above comments, you might insist that knowledge progresses over time, and that we are at least getting closer to the truth. Perhaps! But the success of the quest for knowledge in the past is no guarantee that it will continue to be successful in the future.

Indeed, if we take the problem of induction seriously, perhaps the laws of nature will inexplicably break down one day and the world dissolve into chaos. Admittedly, these laws have worked well enough up until now, but how can we be sure that they will continue to be nothing more than local anomalies in the tangled fabric of the universe! What confidence can we then have that our way of looking at things is the right one
If you are religious, you may say that ??? God made man in his own image??™ and designed us so that if we use our faculties correctly we can discover the truth. However, you would probably agree that there is still a gulf between the truth as grasped by us and the truth as it is known to God. If you are not religious, you might argue that since we have evolved to cope with reality, our faculties are likely to be generally trustworthy-for otherwise we would not have survived.

However, the father of evolutionary theory, Charles Darwin was not so sure about this, and once mournfully confessed: 'With me the horrid doubt always arises of the lower animals, are of any value or at all trustworthy.'

The upshot of our discussion seems to be that at the most fundamental level there is an unbridgeable gap between our picture of reality and reality itself. This might suggest that while we can continue to talk about truth in an ordinary, everyday sense-truth with a small 't' - we may need to abandon the belief that we can ever achieve the Truth. Beyond dogmatism and relativism Perhaps it is a good thing if we abandon the thirst for absolute truth; for it brings with it the danger that if you think you are in possession of such a truth, you seek to impose it on other people. You only have to glance at history to see the damage done by various kinds of dogmatism. The world might be a better place if people held their beliefs with a degree of humility. The lure of relativism Since we do not have an absolute God's-eye view of the universe and can only know the-univers-as-it-is-for-us, you might think that our only choice is to embrace relativism and say that truth is relative. There is my truth, and there is your truth- but there is not absolute truth.

We should, however, be careful here. For to say that we can never know the truth is not the same as saying that no such truth exists. You might say that a truth that can never be known has no practical value, but that does not make it any less true. If Jones is murdered and all the evidence is destroyed in a fire, we may never know who killed him, but there is still a truth of the matter.

You might still find relativism an attractive position on the grounds that it encourages a tolerant 'live and let live' attitude, which is appropriate

in a multicultural world. But, as we saw in Chapter 1, relativism is also open to the objection that it is self-contradictory. The statement “There is no truth” seems to refuse itself as soon as you ask if it is true. If it is true, then there is at least one truth; and if it is false then it is not the case that there is no truth. A sophisticated relativist might try to avoid this problem by suggesting that we should simply abandon all talk of truth for us to be able to dispense with it completely. Whether or not relativism encourages tolerance is debatable; but I think that in practice the drawbacks of embracing it outweigh the benefits.

For if you abandon the belief that the truth is “out there” independent of us, you no longer have any objective grounds for evaluating beliefs and distinguishing wishful thinking from “facts”. And if your beliefs are no longer disciplined by the truth, they are likely to end up being determined by nothing more than prejudice, or persuasion, or power. The danger is that you will then believe something simply because it fits in with your prejudice or because someone has persuaded you to believe it, or because you have been bullied or indoctrinated into believing it. This is clearly not a desirable state of affairs. Degrees of truth
If we reject both dogmatism and relativism, and distrust not only those who claim to have found the truth, but also those who say that there is no truth, you might wonder what options are left to us.

One possibility is to think of truth as an ideal, which “like all ideals-is unattainable, but which nevertheless gives direction to the quest for knowledge and which can be nearer to or further away from. What then does it mean to say that something is nearer to the truth than something else? Well, it is surely nearer the truth to say that a Labrador is a “dog” than

to say that it is an "animal"; and it is nearer the truth to say that the earth is round than to say that it is flat; and Einstein's theory of relativity is nearer the truth than Newtonian mechanics. Admittedly, our current truths may be replaced in the future by other truths, but at least until now it has made sense to think of each revolution in thought as bringing us closer to the truth.