

The five main theories of truth



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

There are five main theories of “ truth”, these are: the correspondence theory, the coherence theory, and the pragmatic, redundancy and semantic theories. All these theories are concerned with the truth and falsity of what people say or think.

A. Correspondance Theory

The correspondence theory of truth states that the falsity or truth of a statement can only be judged in its relationship to the world and whether it actually describes the world accurately; therefore true statements correspond to the actual state of affairs. This model is a traditional way of thinking and can be linked back to some of the Greek Philosophers such as Aristotle, Socrates and Plato. This theory can be broken down into two sections; on the first hand this theory tries to conjecture a relationship between thoughts or statements and on the other hand things or facts. As Aristotle stated in his Metaphysics:

“ To say that (either) that which is is not or that which is not is, is a falsehood; and to say that that which is is and that which is not is not, is true”(Aristotle ())

The correspondence theory can be split into two main categories the first being correspondence as congruence. Correspondence as congruence claims that for a statement to be true must have a structural isomorphism(2) that is directly linked to a state of affairs in the world that makes it true(3).

This can be best demonstrated in Russell’s “ Theory of Judgment” in which he proposed that belief cannot be a binary relation between the believer and

fact, as one could not have false beliefs. As an alternative, Russell construed belief as a multigrade relation between the believer and the objects in belief.

For example:

“ Othello believes that Desdemona loves Cassio”

This statement can be seen as “ true” in the eye’s of Russell as the object of the belief are related as they are judged to be related and if Desdemona does love Cassio. However one of the main criticisms of Russell is that it is impossible to hold a false belief about non-existents, although it is obvious that there are such false beliefs, for example, a child believing Santa Claus has a white beard, however the sentence itself would be said to be false as there is no such thing as Santa. Richard Kirkham (1992) states, in relation to this, that the theory of descriptions can be applied to sentences but not beliefs as it is impossible to judge non-existents on Russell’s theory. There is a huge pothole in this theory as some sentences can pose difficult for this model: a “ small cheque” is a kind of cheque but a “ counterfeit cheque” may not be in Russell’s case as adjectives such as “ counterfeit” lose their simple meaning. This caused Russell to abandon his theory and develop a new theory of judgment in 1919.

Correspondence as correlation is the second half of the correspondence theory and was developed by John Austin. Austin theorised that there does not necessarily need to be a relationship between a true statement and the state of affairs that makes it true as he tried to prove that the value of truth was only a small part in the range of utterances. Austin heavily disagreed with the presumption that utterances always have to “ constate” or “ describe”

the subject in turn making them true or false and thus Austin introduced “performance” sentences(4).

Performance utterances are not true or false that is not truth-evaluable(5) instead they can be said to be “happy” or “unhappy”(J. S. Andersson (1975)). Uttering such performatives can be said to be doing a certain type of illocutionary action. This to Austin would not just be describe as:

“...just saying or describing something”(J. L. Austin (1962))

Austin gives an example of a performance utterance:

“ I bet you six pence it will rain tomorrow”(J. L. Austin (1962))

In making this utterance you are obligating a promise, you are not just simply stating what you are doing. However if, for example, you do not keep your promise and offer the sixpence if it rains although this is not in order with the utterance the sentence is not false it can just be said to be “happy” or “unhappy”, however this also demonstrates how the sentence can never be true. However, J. R. Searle argues that performatives are in fact true or false and says performatives are what we would otherwise call declarations and is a technical notion of Searle’s account:

“...the successful performance of the speech act is sufficient to bring about the fit between words and world, to make the propositional content true.” (J. R. Searle(1989)).

Bach and Harnish (1991) agree with Searle in saying that performances can be true or false, however for different reasons. They believed that these

performances are directly statements not declarations. On the other hand Bach and Harnish attack Searle stating that ordinary performances do not need rationalisation, because they are an ordinary and successful way of communicating when the audience can infer your communicative intention. This contrasts Searle's view point as he states performances are "declarations" as declarations are only "accidentally communicative" and are only really successful if they fulfil the conventions. Bach and Harnish finally argued that even though communicative success relies on the agreement that they are statements the performative force of performatives does not.

B. The Coherence Theory

The coherence theory differs to the correspondence theory for two main reasons the first being that the competing theories give different meaning to the proposition and their truth condition. According to the coherence theory the relationship is that of coherence. There are several versions of the coherence theory of which differ on two major parts. The different versions of the theory give different accounts of the coherence relation.

In accordance to some early versions of the theory the coherence can simply be put as consistency; therefore to say that the propositions join together to a specific set of propositions is to say that the propositions are consistent to that set. This version can be deemed unsatisfactory for the following reason: consider two propositions that belong to different sets surely these propositions could both be consistent with a specific set whilst simultaneously being inconsistent with each other. The second and more credible version of the coherence theory offers that coherence is some form

of entailment. In accordance with this version a proposition coheres with a set of propositions if and only if it is entailed by many sets.

There are two principle lines of arguments that have led philosophers to adopt a coherence theory of truth. Early advocates were convinced by the focus on metaphysical questions, lately there has been attention paid to the epistemological and semantic basis of coherence. The earliest versions of coherence were associated with the idea of idealism. The coherence theory was adopted by a number of British idealists in the latter years of the nineteenth century. For example, F. H Bradley (1914).

It can be said that idealists are lead to the coherence theory because of their metaphysical position. Advocates of the correspondence theory believe that statements and beliefs are ontologically different from the objective setting which makes the said belief true. Idealists on the other hand do not believe that there is an ontological standpoint between beliefs and what makes these beliefs true. From this idealist point of view reality is simple a collection of beliefs. Accordingly, a belief cannot be accurate or true because it corresponds to something that is not a belief. As an alternative the truth of a belief can only be validated if consistent with its coherence with other held beliefs, therefore a belief that come from an idealism perspective comes in degrees. A belief is true to the degree that it coheres with others.

Bearing this in mind it has been stated by Candlish (2006) that F. H. Bradley described an identity theory not a coherence theory.

There is another route to adopt when looking at coherence theory, one of an epistemological route. Blanshard (1939) argued that:

<https://assignbuster.com/the-five-main-theories-of-truth/>

“... a coherence theory of justification leads to a coherence theory of truth.”

His argument is as follows: Someone might believe that coherence with a set of beliefs is a test to seek the truth but that the truth is comprised of a correspondence theory of objective facts. Never the less, if truth consists in correspondence to facts, coherence with a set of beliefs will not suffice to test for the truth. This can be said to be the case as there is no concrete guarantee that a succinct coherent set of beliefs is a foolproof test for the truth. If coherence is simply a good but weak test for the truth, then the argument fails (Rescher 1973). There is a “ falling apart” of truth, as Blanshard suggests, if it can be only seen as a fallible test.

Another view point is that we cannot “ get outside” or “ escape” our own beliefs making it complicated to compare statements to objective facts. There is evidence of a version of this argument adopted by logical positivists such as Neurath (1983) and Hempel (1935). This argument is similar to Blanshard’s in which it depends of the coherence theory for justification. This line of argument infers that we will never know if a proposition corresponds to reality.

This argument is scrutinised by two main criticisms. Firstly, it relies on the coherence theory for validation and therefore susceptible to any objections to this theory. Secondly, a coherence theory does not always follow these premisses. We cannot imply that a proposition that cannot be know to comply with reality does not comply with reality. Even if correspondence theorists agree that we can only know the propositions which fall in line with our beliefs, they can still believe that truth is held within our

correspondence; if so then it must be accepted that there are truths which cannot be known. Otherwise, it can be said, that the coherence of a statement with a set of fixed beliefs is a valid indicator that the statement corresponds to objective facts and we can safely know that propositions correspond. This was the viewpoint of Davidson (1920)

It is felt that coherence theorists need to justify that propositions cannot correspond to objective facts, not just that they cannot be known to. As noted, the coherence and correspondence theories have different views about the conditions of truth. One way to help decide which of these accounts is correct is to be aware of the procedure by which propositions are assigned truth conditions.

Finally Coherentists can dispute that the lone condition that the speaker can justify his or her own propositions is only in relation to his or her beliefs (Young (1995)).

There are many criticisms of the coherence theory of truth; however there are two that will be focused on: the specification objection and the transcendence objection.

The specific objection states that coherence theorists have no possible method to identify a set of propositions without contradicting their own. This argument can be first seen in Russell (1907).

However there are other uses of “truth” and the word “true”, for example, we speak of a true friend however this is often set aside, perhaps derivative but at any rate different. Many views are held about how the content of what

we say and think should be specified thus leading us to be concerned with what the bearers of truth are; for Wittgenstein the world consisted of facts. Human beings are made aware of facts by virtue of our mental representation and thoughts. These thoughts are expressed in propositions, whose form indicates the position of these facts in reality. Everything that is true, that is, all the facts that constitute the world and which (in principle) can be expressed by atomic sentences.

Tautological expressions occupy a special role in this language framework because they are true under all conditions, however tautologies are literally nonsense as they convey nothing about what the facts truly are. Despite this, since they are true under all conditions, tautologies provide the underlying structure of all language; this being thought and reality. Fitting with the ideas in Wittgenstein's writings, *Tractatus* (6.1), that the most scientific, logical features of the world are not themselves additional facts about it.

Much like beauty propositions are entirely devoid of value. Facts are just facts; everything else that gives the world meaning must reside elsewhere. Wittgenstein was trying to achieve a properly logical language; therefore only dealing with what is true. Aesthetics judgements about what is beautiful and ethical judgments about what is good simply cannot be expressed within logical language, since they transcend what can be pictured in thought. This can be seen as a major problem as this would leave all the major questions in traditional philosophy not only unanswered but also un-askable. It is therefore not unfair to conclude that the *Tractatus* itself is nothing more than useful nonsense.

“ Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.”

This stark and lone statement renders literally all of human life unspeakable. It was this carefully delineated sense of what logical language can properly express which influenced the ideas of Logical Positivism. Wittgenstein proposed himself that there was nothing left of philosophers to do which is reflected in his abandonment of the discipline for nearly a decade.

The problem with Wittgenstein’s logical analysis is that it demands too much precision, both in the definitions of words and in the representations of their logical structure. In ordinary language, applications of a word often only bear a “ family resemblance” to one another; also there are many grammatical forms of expressing the same basic thought. However, under these conditions.