The pragmatic theory of truth william james

The Pragmatic theory of truth is made up of the accounts, definitions, and theories of the concept truth that distinguish the philosophies of pragmatism and pragmaticism. This concept of truth is the subject of many great thinkers' ideas, who influenced this area of philosophy and whose theories, though different have common features. These thinkers were Charles Sanders Peirce, William James and John Dewey. Some of the most characteristic features can be identified as a relying on the pragmatic maxim to clarify meanings of difficult concepts, and also an emphasis, that belief, knowledge and truth are actually a product of the process: inquiry.

As most pragmatic theories, this one has roots in the minds of earlier philosophers and their philosophies, especially the Golden Age, the Scholastics and Immanuel Kant. They provide a solid background for an invaluable insight into the twist and twirl of ideas that developed in the more modern time. Due to the fact that truth through the pragmatic prism is quite often confused with a number of other notions, I believe that underlining these will put the subject matter into the proper context to contrast.

" Truth" is a term used to describe those beliefs that are capable of reliably guiding action to an expected outcome. We call a belief true when it successfully leads us to an anticipated experience. For example, my belief that there will be a full moon on the 30th of this month counts as true when, sure enough, I look at the sky that night and see a full moon. When that happens, we can certainly say this belief is now true, but we are naturally tempted to wonder if this belief was true a few weeks ago, when I first wrote these words.

A classical conception of truth is that it is the good of logic, in a case in which logic is a normative science that is an examination into a good, or a value that looks for knowledge and ways to reach it. Most explorations of the very character of truth commence with the evaluation of the elements that make up that truth. In judging whether the carrier of information, meaning and significance are undeniably truth-bearers.

If we take things into consideration in a very general matter, there are slim chances that the judgment of a work, proving to be either true or false, will become set in stone; it will most probably always remain a judgment call, as it is more commonly referred to. Nevertheless there are many properly delineated areas in which it is indeed useful to consider disciplined forms of evaluation and the observation of these leads to and permits the method to come into existence and further judge truth and falsity.

Theories of truth can be depicted taking into account the several aspects of description that affect the quality of what is true. The truth predicates used in various theories can be classified by the number of things that condition the proper judgment of a sign, the sign being one of the very first things to be looked at. Formal logic calls this the arity of the predicate. Another division can be made in accordance with the subdivision of any number of more specific characters that theorists consider crucial

A mondiac truth predicate is one that applies to its main subject – typically a concrete representation or its abstract content – independently of reference to anything else. In this case a truthbearer is true in and of itself. A dyadic truth predicate applies to its main subject only in reference to something

else, a second subject. Most commonly, the auxiliary subject is either an object, an interpreter, or a language to which the representation bears some relation. The third form of truth predicate is the triadic one, which applies to its main subject only in reference to a second and third subject. In a pragmatic theory of truth, for example, one has to state clearly both the object of the sign, and either its interpreter or another sign called the interpretant, before it can be said that the sign is true of its object to its interpreting agent.

Numerous requirements must regarded with respect to any fundamentally simple scheme of classification, as real practice rarely has any pure types, and there are circumstances in which it is useful to mention of a theory of truth that is " almost" k-adic, or that " would be" k-adic if specific features could be abstract away and neglected in a certain framework of discussion.

William James was an original thinker in and between the disciplines of physiology, psychology and philosophy. His twelve-hundred page masterwork, The Principles of Psychology (1890), is a rich blend of physiology, psychology, philosophy, and personal reflection that has given us such ideas as " the stream of thought" and the baby's impression of the world " as one great blooming, buzzing confusion" (PP 462). It contains seeds of pragmatism and phenomenology, and influenced generations of thinkers in Europe and America, including Edmund Husserl, Bertrand Russell, John Dewey, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. James studied at Harvard's Lawrence Scientific School and the School of Medicine, but his writings were from the outset as much philosophical as scientific. " Some Remarks on Spencer's Notion of Mind as Correspondence" (1878) and " The Sentiment of

Rationality" (1879, 1882) presage his future pragmatism and pluralism, and contain the first statements of his view that philosophical theories are reflections of a philosopher's temperament.

William James argued a century ago for a conception of truth that establishes a clear middle way between the rigid logicism of contemporary analytical philosophy and the relativity of contemporary hermeneutics and deconstructionism. James argued for a humanistic and practical conception of truth, rooted in human experience and indexed to available evidence, and the perspective of human individuals or groups.

His conception of the pragmatic theory is often summarized by his statement, that: " the true is only is only the expedient in our way of thinking, just as the right is only the expedient in our way of behaving." James's take on truth and knowledge is a quite unique one. He separates two ways of knowing things, one being an intuitive knowledge, in direct experience, as a person would see an apple on the table, which he describes as " an all around embracing" of the object by thought, or one could know through " an outer chain of physical or mental intermediaries connecting thought and thing" as Europeans know the rainforests. James held that the intuitive form of knowledge was direct understanding, unmediated by anything, and truth for intuitive knowledge was a matter of direct consciousness in the flow of experience. For theoretical or representative knowledge, to know that a belief was true was to " lead to it through a context which the world supplies"

Speaking about the truth and some theoretical representations of reality, it can be stated that a person has not the freedom to hypothesize any theories or facts he pleases, because of the complexity of the process: in direct experience of either an immediate and intuitive kind, or of an intellectual kind meaning processes within the circumstances the world supplies. These circumstances for creating rational ideas comprise processes in nature, representational systems, social world, and a connection between the stream of consciousness and all of the beforehand mentioned elements. These intellectual experiences offer a verification process and are integrated in the verification process of future truths as well. " Beliefs at any time are so much experience funded. But the beliefs are themselves parts of the sum total of the world's experience, and become matter, therefore, for the next day's funding operations. So far as reality means experienceable reality, both it and the truths men gain about it are everlastingly in process of mutation-mutation towards a definite goal, it may be-but still mutation."

James's metaphor linking the value of true knowledge with those of banking operations underlines the fact that truth must be advantageous. Experiences creating the basis of a truth must be interconnected themselves, thus theories and facts must be repeatedly modified if changes in circumstance occur. In James's words, the pragmatic theory of truth is " True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify. False ideas are those we cannot." That is the practical difference it makes to us to have true ideas; that, therefore is the meaning of truth, for it is all that truth is known-as.

"… The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made true by events. Its verity is in fact an event, a process, the process namely of its verifying itself, its verification. Its validity is the process of its validation".

Starting from this idea, to James the truth and contexts of conscious experience, interaction with processes of the surrounding world, connection between things and ideas, also theories we have of the world and its mechanisms were inseparable. According to James there are on occasion two different explanations are in equal measure compatible with the facts, though there usually are not. Finding enough unruly facts will lead to a revision of theories, which will make people search for innovative facts and ideas.

To obtain the notion of " absolute truth" one must look backward to the history of development of the notion and the history of corrections it suffered through the process of formation. Euclidean Geometry, Ptolemaic Physics and Astronomy, and Scholastic Logic and Metaphysics have all been replaced through the development of new systems of fact and theories. On the other hand, if we look into the future and see before our spiritual eyes an absolute truth toward which we are heading, we are clearly making a mistake and James said that new truth can exist only as consequences of new theories. For truths surface from facts, but they also move forward and add to them, out of which repeatedly new facts and new truths come into existence.

James views rationalists' conception that truth has no connection with practical reasoning as a mistake, just like the sentimentalist myth about

morality. Kant argued that morality was a question of abstract, general truths discovered from pure reason through a categorical imperative. This suggests that acts can only be morel if they succumb to a logical rule and never because of certain feelings or positive consequences they will result in.

In Kant's point of view, only logical coherence with a categorical imperative counts in establishing morality, and that experience is irrelevant. James's take on this is that he holds that Kantian moralists could define and theoreticise about justice, but could not identify it in real life. He said both truth and morality have to be matters of practice in experience, otherwise they are basically meaningless. James also considered truth-seeking a form of humanistic endeavor, rooted in human life.

The moral, emotional and knowledge-seeking functions of human life can not be as radically divorced from one another as the Platonism inherent in math and science sometimes misleads abstractly-oriented people to believe. James said that " all true processes must lead to the face of directly verifying sensible experiences somewhere." He also extended his pragmatic theory well beyond the scope of scientific verifiability, and even into the realm of the mystical: " On pragmatic principles, if the hypothesis of God works satisfactorily in the widest sense of the word, then it is ' true'." True ideas are copies if their realities.

James's other idea is that truth is not made for us, instead we jointly create, " make" truth. In this sense truth is mutable (changeable, variable) and relative to a conceptual scheme. Truth is not predefined in pragmatism, in

James's perspective beliefs are not true until validated by verification. He believed propositions become true over the line of continuously proving to be useful in a person's specific situation. So, with James, and also Schiller, things are made true through verification – this being largely rejected by most pragmatists.

Nevertheless the idea that there can be no truths without some sort of conceptual scheme to express them, is a generally accepted one. " Unless we decide upon how we are going to use concepts like ' object', ' existance', etc., the question ' how many objects exist' does not really make any sense. But once we decide the use of these concepts, the answer to the above-mentioned question within that use or ' version', to put in Nelson Goodman's phrase, is no more a matter of ' convention'." (Maitra 200 p. 40)

The pragmatic theory of truth is an unmistaken result of the American pragmatic philosophical thinking of the early and mid twentieth century. As I stated before, through this prism the nature of truth is identified with the principle of action. An oversimplified way of putting it would be that truth, as such, does not exist in some conceptual, theoretical area of thought independent of social relationship or actions, but rather truth is a function of a dynamic process of engagement with the world and verification.

Despite the fact that this notion is associated predominantly with the work of William James and James Dewey, some traces of the pragmatic theory of truth are present in the works of Peirce too, who says that " there is no distinction of meaning so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference of practice". The gist of this is that a person cannot imagine a

truth or belief, unless imagining I what way that matters in the world also. For example the truth of the idea that ice is cold cannot be comprehended or accepted without also understanding what " coldness" means in context with other objects too, like cold water, cold feet and so on.

A consequence of this is that the discovery of truth happens only through interaction with the world. Truth cannot be found while sitting idly on a chair and thinking about things. People search for belief, not doubt, and this happens on every one of the numerous occasions we come in contact with the world, may that be while doing research or just putting ourselves out there, coming into contact with our surroundings.

A number of significant changes were brought about by James in relation to a better understanding of truth. The most crucial being probably the revision of the public character of truth.

William James made a number of important changes to the Pragmatist understanding of truth. He shifted the process of belief-formation, application, experimentation, and observation from the general to a more intimate level, that of the individual. In this way, a belief turned into truth, when it proved to have practical use in the life of the individual. His theory was that it took time until a person could get from pretending that a belief was true and acting as such, until it actually became useful, helpful and productive, and indeed seen and considered " true".

An important field of application of this theory of truth was that of religion, particularly the question of the existence of God. Taken from his book " Pragmatism" is a statement which is as follows: " On pragmatic principles, if

the hypothesis of God works satisfactorily in the widest sense of the word, it is ' true'." While in " The Meaning of Truth": " The true is only the expedient in our way of thinking, just as the right is only the expedient in our way of behavior."

James's theory and the pragmatic theory in general, as any other philosophical theory, can be confronted on a number of levels. Questions can be raised concerning the ambiguity of terms and of consequences and results. What does " what works" mean exactly, if taken as James suggests it " in the widest sense of the word"? Also how can one judge a complex paradigm's truth value if it is not 100 percent inclining one way or the other?

If we state something like " It is useful to assume I will pass my exams.", that is not at all the same as the statement that " It is true that I will pass my exams." It doesn't work that way. True beliefs are not always useful, and vice-versa, useful ones are not always true. Nietzsche put it like this: " The falseness of a judgement is not necessarily an objection to a judgment: it is here that our new language perhaps sounds strangest. The question is to what extent it is life-advancing, life-preserving, species-preserving, perhaps even species-breeding; and our fundamental tendency is to assert that the falsest judgements (to which synthetic judgments a priori belong) are the most indispensable to us, that without granting as true the fictions of logic, without measuring reality against the purely invented world of the unconditional and self-identical, without a continual falsification of the world by means of numbers, mankind could not live – that to renounce false judgements would be to renounce life, would be to deny life. To recognize untruth as a condition of life: that, to be sure, means to resist customary

value-sentiments in a dangerous fashion; and a philosophy which ventures to do so places itself , by that act alone, beyond good and evil." (Beyond Good and Evil, 333)

Now, Pragmatism may be a handy means for distinguishing truth from untruth. After all, that which is true should produce predictable consequences for us in our lives. In order to determine what is real and what is unreal, it would not be unreasonable to focus primarily upon that which works. This, however, is not quite the same as the Pragmatic Theory of Truth as described by William James.