Examrace

Competitive Exams: Theories of Truth

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Correspondence Theories of Truth

Correspondence theories represent some of the oldest theories of truth, having numerous adherents throughout history from Aristotle, through Kant to early Wittgenstein. Essentially these kinds of theory rely upon the common-sense view that the primary function of language is to say something about the world, and that thought and language should naturally mirror, or agree with, the world. Under correspondence theories, facts exist in the world independently of thought and language, and statements and beliefs are considered true if they correspond or agree with this objective reality of facts. For example, the statement "Buckingham Palace is next to St James'Park" does indeed seem to correspond to the fact that the aforementioned building is spatially located beside this park.

The principal strength of correspondence theories relate to their obviousness. They seem to be in accord with our most basic intuitions, and many philosophers e. g. Descartes and Kant have agreed with this. Despite this, a number of objections to the idea of truth as correspondence have been made. For example, some critics of such theories have asked how beliefs could resemble anything else apart from other beliefs, and have questioned whether correspondence between thought and reality is achievable, since we are unable to step outside of our minds to compare our thoughts with objective reality. Also, Popper argued that human reasoning and judgement is always capable of fallibility and as a result, knowledge of any final or ultimate truth was unlikely. On his "falsificationist" view, there was always a chance of error in any correspondence that we might make between our statements and the world and truth was only provisional.

Coherence Theories of Truth

An alternative idea to the correspondence theory may be found in coherence theories of truth. Basically these kinds of theory evaluate the truth of a set of beliefs or statements in terms of the coherence that exists between them, and remove the need for statements to correspond to anything in the world. Statements are considered to be true if they support each other and provide evidence for each other i.e.. They are consistent and non-contradictory. For example the statements "Cats chase after mice" "Cats like to eat mice" and "Mice are scared of cats" can be viewed as coherent and true since they reinforce each other. A further criterion of coherence relates to the comprehensiveness of the system of beliefs/statements. The coherence theory requires that there should be coherence between as many beliefs as possible.

Coherence theories have the strength that they can get round the above problem that affects correspondence theories. We are certainly more easily able to compare our beliefs and

sentences with other beliefs and sentences than with objective facts. However, coherence theories suffer from drawbacks too. For example, people often do hold beliefs that are contradictory and incoherent and may firmly believe at different times that both beliefs are true. Also as coherence theories require comprehensiveness as a criterion of truth, the more beliefs that are admitted into the set of beliefs under consideration, the more likely it will be that some of them will turn out to be incoherent with other beliefs in the set. Coherence perhaps only goes so far, within a paradigm or a particular school of thought.

Deflationary Theories of Truth

These are recent theories of truth that have emerged in the twentieth century as philosophers have expressed dissatisfaction with the ideas of correspondence and coherence. To deflationary theorists, truth is not a property of sentences established through either correspondence or coherence, but rather it is a rhetorical device that people use for stylistic reasons or for convenience. On this theory, to say that a statement is true does not add anything to the statement itself and the whole notion of truth is, as a result, either redundant or minimalist in content. For example, to say that "It is true that Caesar was murdered" is considered to be practically identical in content to the statement "XYZ was murdered" and the words "It is true that …" are considered to add nothing except emphasis.

A key strength of deflationary theories is that they are very much in tune with current trends in philosophy of being sceptical towards grand metaphysical claims about concepts such as truth. Twentieth century philosophers such as Frege and Ayer have favoured this approach. However, the deflationary theory is in direct opposition to the idea of correspondence, which many philosophers hold as a condition that any theory of truth must accommodate in some fashion.

Pragmatic Theories of Truth

Another account of truth can be found within the philosophical school of pragmatism. To pragmatists, beliefs are true if they are a good basis for action i.e.. They are useful and lead people to successful outcomes. For example, if one found that being polite to other people always caused them to be polite in return, then the belief that politeness is necessarily reciprocated would be true.

However, while this theory might seem quite sensible and practical at first sight, further examination reveals some weaknesses. For example, success may have occurred through chance rather than through the operation of some actual, repeated cause and effect. The witch doctor whose dances lead to rain in periods of drought may simply be lucky, rather than possessing true beliefs. Pragmatic theories seem to lack the rigour of the correspondence and coherence theories, and seem to admit the view that truth is relative to a culture, since beliefs that may be a good basis for action in one culture e. g. Moral beliefs, may not necessarily be so in another.

The Semantic Theory of Truth

In the twentieth century, the logician Tarski put forward an account of truth that found some favour with the increased linguistic focus of much philosophy. While he did not offer a substantive theory of truth in itself, Tarski did provide a logical account of the "adequacy conditions" that a theory of truth should satisfy. Tarski argued that any definition of truth should have the consequence that every true sentence in a language should fit into his "T-schema" as follows:

S is true if, and only if, P where S is the name of the sentence, and P is the expression of the sentence. For example, "Snow is white" is true if and only if snow is white. Tarski wanted to define the term "true sentence" in a formal manner, so that one could then go on to analyse what truth might mean for a language.

Tarksi proposed that truth could be defined for a language with the aid of a semantic concept called satisfaction, which he viewed as underpinning the truth or falsehood of statements. Tarski's approach was to investigate the syntactic structure of a language in terms of its "relations of satisfaction" Tarski argued that if one could show how such relations of satisfaction worked for all predicates in a language, then it would be possible to establish how truth was built up in that language. Tarksi observed that while it would be impossible to list all the true sentences of a natural language, one could generate the truth conditions for an infinite number of sentences of that language from a finite amount of predicates and the notion of satisfaction.

For example, the following sentence: x is north of y illustrates a relation of satisfaction for English into which certain ordered pairs e. g. London or Athens may be inserted, thereby illustrating one of the ways in which truth is constructed in the English language.

A key strength of the semantic theory is its formality. Furthermore, Tarski himself considered that he was building upon the features of the correspondence theory, which as has been mentioned has wide acceptance among philosophers and lay people. With regards to weaknesses, Tarski's theory (admittedly by his own admission) provides no substantive criterion for truth like the correspondence and coherence theories do, and its utility has been questioned as many meaningful sentences involving modal concepts such as necessity and possibility do not seem to easily lend themselves to the formalisation of Tarski's approach.

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