

CHAPTER THREE

THEORIES OF TRUTH

In this chapter, I shall briefly sketch three classical and other major kinds of theories of truth which have been proposed, and attempt to indicate how they relate to each other.

3.1 Coherence Theories of Truth

Coherence theories take truth to consist in relations of coherence among a set of beliefs. Simply put, coherence theory of truth holds that truth consists in coherence; the test of the truth of all statements derives from their relations with other statements. The test for truth consists of relations among beliefs themselves. Our search for knowledge thus requires a consistence readjustment of beliefs, the aim of which is to achieve coherence. For instance, if in a certain village inter-family marriage is not permitted, then it is not plausible to believe that A is the husband of B when it has been established that A and B are siblings. Also, such statements as “twice two is half of eight” or “what is known cannot be unknown” are true in virtue of the meanings of the words that express them. It is because the meanings of the words are internally related as they are (i.e. coherence) that these statements are true. According to the coherence theory of justification, also known as coherentism, a belief is justified, or justifiably held, only if it coheres with a set of beliefs already known to be true and justified. However, there is a refutation on this theory, which posits that, to insist that a judgment is true because of its coherence and consistency with a reality that is accepted as true, could lead to a dangerous circularity. An example is, when there are false statements, each claiming to be true for reasons of coherence. In this way, the theory does not distinguish between a coherent or consistent truth and a consistent error.

3.2 Correspondence Theories of Truth

Correspondence theories take the truth of a proposition to consist, not in its relation to other propositions, but in its relation to the world, its correspondence to reality or to the facts. During their “logical atomist” periods, both Russell and Wittgenstein offered definitions of truth as the correspondence of a proposition to facts. The question however is, how do we tell whether or not a sentence corresponds to the fact? To tackle the problem Carnap argues that statements reporting immediate perceptual experience are incorrigible, that is to say, we can directly verify that they correspond to the facts. For instance, the statement that, it is raining, can only be true if it can be verified that it is actually raining. If this is done, then one can say that the statement corresponds to the fact, and as such, the statement is true. In other words, the correspondence theory of truth states that the truth or falsity of a statement is determined only by how it relates to the world and whether it accurately describes (i.e., corresponds with) that world. There is a loophole in this theory. As we have seen above, the theory compares ideas with reality. But, can ideas be compared with reality? Since we know only our own experience, how can we get outside our ideas to get to reality as it is in itself?

3.3 The Pragmatist Theory of Truth

The pragmatist theory developed in the works of Peirce, Dewey, and James has affinities with both coherence and correspondence theories, allowing that the truth of a belief derives from its correspondence with reality, but stressing also that it is manifested by the belief's survival of test by experience, and its coherence with other beliefs. Only a truth of this kind is workable. According to the pragmatic maxim, the meaning of a concept is to be given by reference to the practical or experimental consequences of its application. As James puts it,²⁷ there can be no difference that makes no difference. Hence, the pragmatic approach to truth is to ask what difference it makes whether a belief is true. For instance, would it make any difference to believe that God exists? Would the application of such a belief work out for the good of the society? If the answer is yes, then the statement that God exists is true, otherwise it is false. The problem associated with this theory is that it has some relativist tendencies.

3.4 Semantic Theory of Truth

Aristotle has observed that “to say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, or of what is not that it is not, is true.”²⁸ In proposing his semantic theory of truth, Tarski aims to explicate the sense of “true” which the above dictum captures. Truth, in Tarski's account, is defined in terms of the semantic relation of satisfaction, a relation between open sentences (e.g. x is greater than y) and non-linguistic objects (e.g. the numbers 6 and 5).

3.5 Saul Kripke's Theory of Truth

The truth theory recently proposed by Kripke (1975) is a variant of Tarski's account, modified essentially to cope in a more sophisticated way with semantic paradoxes. His theory builds on valued interpretation of language. For instance, he avers that sentences may be neither true nor false (N) as well as true (T) or false (F).²⁹ It is a formal theory of truth, believed to be alternative to Tarski's 'orthodox' theory, based on truth-value gaps. The theory is proposed as a fairly plausible model for natural language and as one which allows rigorous definitions to be given for various intuitive concepts, such as semantic paradoxes. A semantic paradox is a seemingly contradictory or absurd statement that expresses a possible truth; it can also mean a self-contradictory and false proposition. The liar paradox is one of the simplest yet most famous example of paradoxes out there. The statement “this statement is a lie” or “this statement is false” is a paradox because if that statement is indeed a lie, then it would be saying a truth.

3.6 Karl Popper's Theory of Truth

Popper's account of truth and his theory of verisimilitude or nearness to the truth is also based upon Tarski's theory, which Popper regards as supplying a more precise version of traditional

²⁷ Tarski, Alfred. “The Semantic Conception of Truth and the Foundations of Semantics.” In *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 4, 1944.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Kripke, Saul. Outline of a Theory of Truth. *Journal of Philosophy*, 72(1), 1975,690-716.

correspondence theories. Popper is one of the most prominent philosophers of science. But his *falsificationist* proposal differs from the *verifiability* criterion in some important ways.³⁰ First, Popper does not hold that non-scientific claims are meaningless. Instead, he argues that such a unfalsifiable claims can often serve important roles in both scientific and philosophical contexts, even if we are incapable of asserting their truth or falsity. Second, while Popper is a realist who holds that scientific theories aim at the truth, he does not think that empirical evidence can ever provide us grounds for believing that a theory is either true or likely to be true.³¹ In this sense, Popper is a *fallibilist* who holds that while the particular unfalsified theory we have adopted might be true, we could never know this to be the case. For this same reason, Popper holds that it is impossible to provide justification for one's belief that a particular scientific theory is true. Finally, where others see science progressing by confirming the truth of various particular claims, Popper describes science as progressing on an evolutionary model, with observations selecting against unfit theories by falsifying them.

In philosophy, **verisimilitude** (or truthlikeness) is the notion that some propositions are closer to being true than other propositions. The problem of verisimilitude is the problem of articulating what it takes for one false theory to be closer to the truth than another false theory.³² This problem was central to the philosophy of Karl Popper, largely because Popper was among the first to affirm that truth is the aim of scientific inquiry while acknowledging that most of the greatest scientific theories in the history of science are, strictly speaking, false.³³ If this long string of purportedly false theories is to constitute progress with respect to the goal of truth, then it must be at least possible for one false theory to be closer to the truth than others.

3.7 The Redundancy Theory of Truth

The redundancy theory of truth, offered by Ramsey (1927) claims that “true” is redundant, for to say that it is true that *p* is equivalent to saying that *p*. Evidently, this account has some affinities with Aristotle's dictum, and consequently with some aspects of Tarski's theory. According to this theory, asserting that a statement is true is completely equivalent to asserting the statement itself. For example, asserting the sentence “*snow is white* is true” is the same as asserting the sentence “*snow is white.*” Frege expressed the idea this way:

It is worthy of notice that the sentence “I smell the scent of violets” has the same content as the sentence “It is true that I smell the scent of violets.” So it seems, then, that nothing

³⁰H.C. Ezebuilo, “Popper's Piecemeal Engineering and Social Reform in Africa.” Unpublished *Thesis Submitted to Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, 2017.*

³¹ Ibid.

³² “Truthlikeness,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Retrieved October 22, 2022.

³³ Pavel Tichy. On Popper's Definitions of Verisimilitude. *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*. (Oxford University Press, 1974), 25(2):155-160.

is added to the thought by my ascribing to it the property of truth.³⁴

When we assert a proposition explicitly, such as when we say “I smell the scent of violets,” then saying “It is true that I smell the scent of violets” would be redundant; it would add nothing because the two have the same meaning. In other words, the two are necessarily equivalent.

3.8 Performative Theory of Truth

Peter Strawson formulated a performative theory of truth in the 1950s. Like Ramsey, Strawson believed that there is no separate problem of truth apart from determining the semantic contents (or facts of the world) which gives the words and sentences of language the meanings that they have.³⁵ The performative theory of truth argues that ascribing truth to a proposition is not really characterizing the proposition itself, nor is it saying something redundant. Rather, it is telling us something about the speaker’s intentions. Through the speaker’s praising, accepting, conceding, agreeing with, or endorsing of the proposition, he or she is guaranteeing our adoption (our belief in) the proposition. Instead of saying, “It is true snow is white,” one could substitute, “I embrace the claim that snow is white.” The key idea is that saying of some proposition, P, that it is true is to say in a disguised fashion, “I commend P to you,” or “I endorse P,” or something of the sort. In this case, you are performing the action of giving your listener license or guarantee to believe the proposition (and to act upon the belief).

3.9 Prosentential Theory of Truth

The prosentential theory of truth suggests that the grammatical predicate “is true” does not function semantically or logically as predicate. All uses of “is true” are pro-sentential uses. When someone asserts “it is true that it is raining,” the person is asking the hearer to consider the sentence “it is raining” and is saying that “that, is true” where the remark “that, is true” is taken holistically as a prosentence, in analogy to a pronoun. A pronoun such as “she” is a substitute for the name of the person being referred to. Similarly, “that is true” is a substitute for the proposition being considered. Likewise, for the expression “it is true.” According to the prosentential theory, all uses of “true” can be reduced to uses either of “that is true” or “it is true” or variants of these with other tenses.³⁶

3.10 From Truth to Knowledge

For generations, discussions of truth have been bedeviled by the question, “how could a proposition be true unless we know it to be true?” Aristotle’s famous worry was that contingent propositions about the future, such as “there will be a sea battle tomorrow,” couldn’t be true now, for fear that this would deny free will to the sailors involved. Advocates of the Correspondence Theory and the Semantic Theory have argued that a proposition need not be

³⁴ Bradley, Raymond and Norman Swartz. *Possible World: an Introduction to Logic and Its Philosophy*. London: Hackett Publishing Company, 1979.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Davidson, Donald. *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984.

known in order to be true. Truth, they say, arises out of a relationship between a proposition and the way the world is. No one need know that that relationship holds, nor – for that matter – need there even be any conscious or language-using creature for that relationship to obtain. In short, truth is an objective feature of a proposition, not a subjective one. For a true proposition to be known, it must (at least) be a justified belief.