

Metaphysics & Epistemology

Truth (II)

The pragmatist view

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Difficulties:

- When we are wondering if, e.g., it is true that there is no planet beyond the orbit of Pluto, we are certainly not wondering if it is useful to believe that. Such examples show that the concept of truth is very different from the concept of usefulness. If true beliefs and useful beliefs are the same, then either we have a strange coincidence or there is an explanation that is not obvious at all and should be provided by supporters of the pragmatist view.

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The pragmatist view

- There are beliefs that are useful but not true. E.g., people who overestimate their intelligence or, more generally, their abilities somewhat (but not much) get some benefit in their lives.
- Also, there seem to be beliefs that are true but not useful. What do I gain from knowing that the Andromeda galaxy is two million light years away?

The pragmatist view

- A belief can be useful for a person or society, but fail to be useful for others. Consequently, supporters of the pragmatist view ought to accept that a belief can be true for a person or society, but fail to be true for others. Thus they are led to relativism: truth is relative to the various agents. (The phrase ‘true for a person’ doesn’t here mean ‘true in a person’s opinion’. It means ‘really true relative to a person’. But does it make sense to say that one and the same belief is really true relative to someone, but not relative to someone else?)

The pragmatist view

- Pragmatism was a current in American philosophy in the 19th and early 20th century, but its main representatives (C. Peirce, W. James and J. Dewey) mostly didn't hold the view we have just discussed.
- They considered that true beliefs and satisfactory beliefs are the same, but when talking about satisfactory beliefs, they meant those that are safe from doubt, those that do not run the risk of being falsified.

The pragmatist view

Still, that approach, too, presents some difficulties:

- Indeed, true beliefs do not run the risk of being falsified, but it seems that a belief may not be true while it is not possible to find out that it is not true, in which case it doesn't run the risk of falsification.
- It is also possible for a true belief not to be safe from doubt. For it may be true while it is not possible to prove its truth conclusively and irrevocably.

The redundancy view

- According to the redundancy view about truth, the word 'true', in its most basic use, can be omitted without any conceptual change: a sentence of the form 'It is true that p' means the same as the plain 'p'. The phrase 'it is true that' is a pleonasm that simply adds emphasis. That view was advocated by G. Frege and F. Ramsey.

The redundancy view

- The question that arises is how the word 'true' functions in sentences that do not have the form 'It is true that p'. If the redundancy view does not answer that question, then it will only concern one use of the concept of truth.
- For example, what is the meaning of the sentence 'Everything Einstein said is true'? It does not (???) mean the same as the conjunction, C, of all the sentences uttered by Einstein.

The redundancy view

- For if they meant the same, then the statement :

(1) It could have been that it was the case that ... but it was not the case that everything Einstein said is true

where you should imagine C written in place of the dots, would be synonymous with:

(2) It could have been that it was the case that everything Einstein said is true, but it was not the case that everything Einstein said is true.

The redundancy view

- Then, (1) would be absurd, just as (2) is absurd. But (1) is right. If Einstein had said different things from what he actually said, C would not be the conjunction of all the sentences he uttered. Thus it could have been that he had said some inaccuracies, but still things were exactly as they are described by C.

The redundancy view

- Similarly, what does sentence (3) mean?

(3) *'Snow is white' is a true sentence.*

- It doesn't mean the same as the plain sentence 'Snow is white'. For if they meant the same, then the statement:

(4) *It could have been that it was the case that snow is white, but it was not the case that 'Snow is white' is a true sentence*

would be absurd. But (4) is right. It could have been that snow was white, but there were no languages and sentences (neither true nor false) and the series of sounds snow is white had no content.

The redundancy view

- Ramsey did not discuss claims like (3), but dealt with claims like ‘Everything Einstein said is true’. He analysed them as follows:

(5) $(\forall P)(\text{if Einstein said that } P, \text{ then } P)$.

- Here the variable ‘P’ occurs twice in positions where we could write a sentence (e.g. if Einstein said that spacetime is not Euclidean, then spacetime is not Euclidean).
- The usual variables occur either right after a quantifier or in positions where we could write a name; e.g. $(\forall x)(\text{if } x \text{ is human, then } x \text{ is mortal})$.
- We say that in (5) we have quantification into sentence position. The question what is the sense of that quantification (if it has a sense) is a difficult issue in the philosophy of logic. At any rate, to the extent that it is not clear what sense (5) has, it is not clear if Ramsey’s analysis is correct.

The concept of a proposition and Tarski's schema

- Propositions are not sentences but can be expressed by sentences.
- A sentence is made up of words; a proposition is not made up of words.
- The sentence 'Kant is the most important German philosopher' and every synonymous sentence in English or in another language express the same proposition: that Kant is the most important German philosopher.
- There may be propositions that no language will ever express.
- Each proposition is a piece of information about how things are in the world, and it is true or false depending on whether the information is right or not. (For this reason, interrogative or imperative sentences express no proposition.)
- A proposition x and a proposition y are identical iff they constitute just the same information.

The concept of a proposition and Tarski's schema

- As for Tarski's schema, it is the schema

(6) The sentence 'p' is true iff p,

where, in order to get an instance of the schema, we must replace the letter p, both inside and outside the quotation marks, with a sentence that is declarative (i.e., not interrogative or imperative).

- Two instances of (6) are the following:

(*) The sentence 'Aristotle is a philosopher' is true iff Aristotle is a philosopher

(**) The sentence 'Aristotle is a doctor' is true iff Aristotle is a doctor.

- Today most philosophers accept that schema (6), or at least some variant of it, characterizes the concept of truth.

Minimalism about truth

- The view that schema (6), or some variant of it, somehow exhausts the concept of truth is called minimalism about truth.
- P. Horwich's minimalism is particularly important: Horwich's main thesis concerns a certain simple theory. This theory has infinitely many axioms. One axiom is that:
 - (+) the proposition that snow is white is true iff snow is white.
- Another axiom is that
 - (++) the proposition that $7 + 5 = 11$ is true iff $7 + 5 = 11$.
- And so on for all propositions, true or false (apart from some very special exceptions). The axioms are all platitudinous.
- Horwich's main thesis is that this theory, together with theories about things other than truth (theories about asserting, believing, logical validity, etc.), suffices to explain all facts that concern truth in general.

Minimalism about truth

- For example, let's examine the fact that there is practical value in having true beliefs.
- Horwich takes it for granted that that is a fact. Someone is more likely to attain her goals if she has true relevant beliefs than if she has false ones.
- Horwich explains it in the following manner. Let's take a belief of the form

(7) If I perform action so-and-so, then my desire for such-and-such will be realized.

- Such a belief usually leads one to perform the corresponding action.

Minimalism about truth

- But if the belief is true and leads to performing the corresponding action, then some desire of the person who has the belief will be realized. For when a belief is true, the proposition that is the content of the belief, is true; and when the proposition that if I perform the action so-and-so my desire for such-and-such will be realized is true, then according to the simple theory described by Horwich, if I perform the action the desire will be realized.
- Thus if someone has a true belief of form (7), then usually some one of her desires is realized. That is why there is practical value in having true beliefs of the form in question.
- Also, there is practical value in having true beliefs of other forms because for no such belief can we exclude the possibility that it may play some role in a reasoning process that will lead us to a true belief of form (7).

Minimalism about truth

- Other theses of Horwich's minimalism:
 - (i) There is a property of truth (had by some sentences, beliefs, etc.) but this property has no deeper nature or essence.
 - (ii) The usefulness of the word 'true' lies in the fact that it allows us to endorse many, even infinitely many, propositions together, and it also allows us to endorse a proposition without knowing exactly what proposition it is.
- We endorse many propositions together when e.g. we say 'Every statement of the form "A or not-A" is true'. We endorse one without knowing what exactly it is when e.g. we say 'What Oscar told you is true' and do not know what exactly Oscar said.
 - (iii) Those who understand the word 'true' are disposed to agree with claims of the form 'The proposition that p is true iff p'. This disposition can explain the use of the word (that is, the ways in which speakers use it), and for this reason we may consider that understanding the word consists in that disposition.

Minimalism about truth

- Although Horwich does not accept the correspondence theories of truth, he believes that the basic idea behind those theories is correct.
- In his opinion, the basic idea is that true sentences, true propositions, etc. are made true by reality; e.g. the proposition that snow is white is true because snow is white.
- According to Horwich, the correctness of that idea is due to how an explanation of all aspects of the world would proceed on the basis of the initial conditions of the universe and the laws of nature.
- In the context of such an explanation, we would first explain why snow is white, and then (invoking the simple theory he described) we would explain why the proposition that snow is white is true.