

THE PRAGMATIC THEORY OF TRUTH: A DEFENSE AND RECONCILIATION

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ABSTRACT

This work submits that the Pragmatic Theory of Truth is a viable theory of truth based on its emphasis on the notion of practical judgment and usefulness. Pragmatism has become an interesting philosophical discourse among intellectuals such as Charles Sander Peirce, William James, John Dewey; and F. S. C. Schiller among others pushing the thesis that whatever works and is useful is true. The focus of the thesis is the critical examination of the Pragmatic theory of truth particularly on how it has so far been able to resolve the questions surrounding the nature of truth. A conceptual analysis approach was adopted in the study, breaking down and scrutinizing ideas and beliefs, asking fundamental questions, and providing probable answers with the hope of determining whether indeed the Pragmatic Theory of Truth can be presented as a viable way of defining whatever is true. Pragmatists have always insisted that whatever is called truth needs to be relevant rather than merely independent of those creating or granting them true value. That conveys the greatest strength of the Pragmatic Theory of Truth specifically its ability to remain dynamic and fluctuating according to real-world application of new knowledge and information, while still allowing for a realistic criterion of lasting truth.

Keywords: Pragmatic, Theory, Truth and Reconciliation.

Introduction

Pragmatism is a philosophical tradition that considers words and thoughts as tools and instruments for prediction, problem-solving; and action; and rejects the idea that the function of thought is to describe, or mirror realities. Pragmatists contend that most philosophical topics, such as the nature of knowledge, language, concepts, meaning, belief, and science are all best viewed in terms of their practical uses and successes.

However, in this paper, we will be discussing briefly what the notion of truth is, the philosophical epistemological problem of truth, the different theories that have been propounded to answer the question of truth, discussing the view of the pragmatists. Explaining truth as usefulness, reconciling pragmatic and other theories of truth.

THE NOTION OF TRUTH

In general, whenever we ask what something is, there are two questions we might be interested in. Suppose that I ask what is gold, I might want to understand the concept "gold", that is what the word 'gold' means in ordinary English. Alternatively, I might be seeking to know the underlying nature of the property of gold, for example, that it is an element with an atomic reading of 79 weight, of course, these projects need not be

completely distinct. My inquiry about gold would presumably pick out many important and substantive facts about gold, e.g., that gold is a malleable yellow metal for instance. Yet it also seems clear that I could have a good grasp of the concept of gold without knowing all the facts about its underlying nature.

“When philosophers ask what truth is, they are interested sometimes in the underlying nature of truth as its property, and sometimes both. In the case of gold, for example, giving an analysis of the concept [for instance, by supplying necessary and sufficient conditions for the application of the word] need not tell you everything about what the property of gold consists of. But in the case of truth, it is somewhat trickier to say how the theories of the concept and propositions about its properties relate. Unlike the case of gold, we have no independent, empirical access to the properties of truth itself except via that concept. Thus disputes over the properties of truth are frequently [but not always] fought on conceptual ground, that is over how we might best define the concept of truth” (Lynch, 2001, pp. 115-117).

This work is not asking about how we can know whether a belief is true or false rather it is asking when it is that a belief can be said to be true or false. It is to be hoped that a clear answer to this question may help in obtaining an answer to the question of what beliefs are true. In specific terms, it asks only "what is truth" or "what is falsehood" not "what beliefs are true" and "what beliefs are false". It is very important to keep these different questions entirely separate since any confusion between them is sure to produce an answer, which may not apply to either.

Most arguments are rendered in statements with the truth. According to D. W. Hamlyn, (as cited in Popper, 1972) truth is not an observable property. You cannot know that a proposition that expresses a belief is true merely by observing it. This according to him means that truth must be a property that statements possess.

The necessity of allowing for falsehood makes it impossible to regard belief as a relation of the mind to a single object which could be said to be what is believed. If belief were so regarded, we should find that, like an acquaintance, it would not admit of the opposition of truth and falsehood, but would have to be always true.

Many theories have been propounded in an attempt to answer what in reality constitutes truth. Some of these theories include;

(A) **The Correspondence Theory of Truth:** The Correspondence Theory is traceable to the empiricist tradition in knowledge acquisition. According to empiricists, the basis of knowledge is a direct perception of the world. Truth in this way lies in the correspondence of what is asserted with what is reported. The Correspondence Theory presupposes the Wittgenstein picture theory of meaning as found in the *Tractatus*, which posits that language mirrors reality.

The Correspondence Theory of Truth sometimes also referred to as the Common Sense view of truth has been the most popular of the truth theories. The theory is

commonly formulated expressing that there is a correspondence between what is expressed and a fact.

According to the theory, a judgment is correct or a proposition is true if there is a fact corresponding to it, and false if there is not. The correspondence theory of truth is a theory, that we all subscribed to in our day-to-day activities. Here, the truth of a statement is assumed independent of our opinions. Rather, it consists in a relation that holds between statements and something outside the general content of statements. The theory then is an objectivist theory. Truth is categorically different from opinion. It is timeless. The cornerstone of the Correspondence Theory of truth can be traced to Aristotle's dictum:

To say of what is that it is not and of what is not, that it is, is false, while to say of what is, that it is, and what is not that it is not is true. (Aristotle 2002)

For Aristotle, what “is” is what exists and what is not is what does not exist. Apart from the existential import of this dictum, there is in addition a relation between saying something that is and stating the truth about it. The relationship between language and fact can therefore be established. We can deduce that correspondence attempts to relate beliefs or propositions and facts together. In the Aristotelian sense, facts can be said to be entities having objective existence outside individuals.

CRITIQUE OF THE CORRESPONDENCE THEORY OF TRUTH

The correspondence theory explicates 'true proposition' along the lines of a “true copy” of a tension. On the one hand, we have the original (the fact of the matter) and we compare this with the copy (the proposition) to check if they correspond with one another (Russell, 2022). If we want to test the truth of the proposition “The book is on the table”, we need to go to where the table is and confirm whether the book is lying on the table. This can only be acceptable of course where observational confrontation is practicable. It cannot and would not work in so many other situations where direct observation is not possible.

The interpretation of truth as the agreement of thought with reality when critically appraised perhaps also looks a bit absurd. For example, in relating thought to reality, how seriously can thought be a likeness of something that in itself is partial? How can thought, an intangible element resembles a cube? Yet another popular criticism against the Correspondence Theory relates to how it is possible to identify the items which are supposed to correspond particularly where there is falsehood and to say what the correspondence or non-correspondence consists (Mackie, 1978). In other words, what is the relationship between a proposition and a fact?

(B) THE COHERENCE THEORY OF TRUTH

The Coherence Theory of Truth can be traced to the rationalist tradition in the acquisition of knowledge. Rationalists believe that reason as opposed to the use of the senses plays a dominant role in our attempt to gain knowledge. The Coherence Theory states that a statement is true if it coheres with other statements and beliefs. It measures

coherence and constituency among statements within a system. Its proponent is Brand Blanshard.

According to Blanshard, (as cited in Woozley, 1985) in a coherent system, no proposition is arbitrary. Rather every proposition is entailed by other jointly and even singly such that, no proposition will stand outside the system. Blanshard further claimed that a proposition cannot be tested mainly on correspondence procedure because perception may not give accurate knowledge of it. Blanshard's view is informed by the assumption that the coherence theory begins with the observation that will test the truth of a belief by seeing its implications and other logically connected beliefs. This is suggesting that all truths eventually hang together and make a unit whose articulation requires the rehearsal of all the constituent truths such that an instance of hanging together with a falsifying effect will not make the statement true. When so stated, the Coherence Theory of Truth appears only as an improvement on the Correspondence Theory of Truth because it accounts for the truth of many beliefs as the content of communication in matters of assertion and discord.

Even though Coherence Theory appears as an improvement on the Correspondence Theory, there are some problems associated with it. These problems include;

1. The Coherence Theory would seem too permissive as a theory of truth, such that so many propositions can be considered true just because they cohere with the system to which they belong. If this is taken then, how do we evaluate the many systems that serve as the determinants of truth for propositions?
2. It might be difficult to affirm legitimately that one system of belief is better than the other with the Coherence Theory of Truth (Dancy, 1985).
3. The notion of truth that this theory presents might only be relative to the system to which the beliefs belong (Owolabi, 2000).

(C). DEFLATIONARY THEORY OF TRUTH

According to the Deflationary Theory of Truth, to assert that a statement is true is just to assert the statement itself. For example, to say, "Snow is white" is true, or that it is true that 'Snow is white' is equivalent to saying simply that 'Snow is white'. This according to Deflationary Theory is all that can be said significantly about the truth of "Snow is white". For the deflationists, truth has no nature beyond what is captured in ordinary claims. Thus, to say "Snow is white" is true in case snow is white. The deflationists are of the view that philosophers looking for the nature of truth are bound to be frustrated because they are looking for something "that is not there". The deflationary theory treats the truth predicate as having only a logical or grammatical function, rather than ascribing a property or relation to a truth bearer, as seen in Correspondence, Coherence, and Pragmatic theories.

(D) SEMANTIC THEORY OF TRUTH: The semantic theory of truth holds that truth is a property of sentences (Ayer 1963). Hence, the claim that a proposition is true can be made only as a formal requirement regarding the language in which the proposition itself is expressed. Thus, according to Tarski, "It rained today" is true if and only if it rained

today.

THE PRAGMATIC AS A THEORY OF TRUTH: A DEFENSE AND RECONCILIATION

Pragmatism as a theory of truth cuts across the transcendental/ empirical distinction since it questions the common presupposition that there is an invidious distinction to be drawn between various kinds of truth. For the pragmatist, the true sentence is not true because they correspond to reality, and so there is no need to worry about what sort of reality we are dealing with or what sort is required, if any. The pragmatist also sees no need to worry about whether Plato or Kant was right in thinking that something non-spatio- temporal makes moral judgments true, nor about whether the absence of such a thing means that such judgments are “merely expressions of emotion”, or “merely conventional” or “merely subjective”.

The Pragmatic Theory of Truth essentially considers the idea of truth to be an affair of practical experience (James, 1948). Pragmatic Theory of Truth according to Williams James, an apostle of the Pragmatic Theory of Truth, asserts that the truth of an idea is its predictive value. In this description, it is expedient to notice the emphasis on verifiability and usefulness. The pragmatic truth tests insist on judging the truth of a proposition by predicting the result of its truth and testing for those results. It further considers the truth of a proposition to be determined by its practicality. Hence, a proposition is true if whatever it affirms is practicable and realizable, while it is false if it is not.

Pragmatic Theory holds that true beliefs are generally useful and false when beliefs are not. All human beings need the useful and if it is useful, according to the pragmatists, it is true. If a doctor wants to cure a patient, it is useful for the doctor to have true beliefs about what will cure the patient. The Pragmatic Theory categorically tells us that a proposition is true if and only if believing it and acting on it, is or would be useful. According to Charles Pierce another advocate of the Pragmatic Theory, practical usefulness is a criterion of meaningfulness with the supposition that a scientific term can be considered to be meaningful on the account that it has practical consequences. Accordingly, true ideas are those we can assimilate, validate, corroborate, and verify while false ideas are those we cannot (Wright 1948). This shows that truth is a relation between our beliefs, statements, and the satisfaction of our expectations. The belief and the statement that paracetamol will cure my headache is true if my expectation of curing the illness (headache) is satisfied by the use of paracetamol.

TRUTH AS USEFULNESS

William James understood the word “usefulness” in a very wide range. Among other things, Pragmatism is connected with satisfying the wills, and desires and reaching the pleasures of being in the world. In other words, something is useful if it is the measure to reach the purpose, and if it plays the role of a tool. Pragmatism in a profound subjective way changes the philosophy of life, its success, and its achievements.

The pragmatic conception of truth is therefore fundamentally different from all the theories of truth particularly those that treat truth as an independent, final cognitive

value. However, Pragmatism is as well a theory of truth, (Buczynska ; James 1904) possessing the truth that is not understood as a purpose itself but on the contrary, only as a measure to reach further purposes. Rational cognition of truth means reaching the end of the road. “We will never achieve the goal but we always come closer to it by improving ourselves. Even when the final goal is never reached, we are accomplishing another goal. Similarly, to the biological evolution that creates better and better species, in pragmatism, we are reaching the best truth, which also evolves, and changes, as a new one replaces the old one” (James, 1907, p.150). James also states that there are many different truths and they are close and inseparably connected to the object. “True ideas are those we can assimilate, validate, corroborate, and verify” (James, 1904). Therefore, ideas or beliefs are true if it “functions”. Even if false, it can be true if it “functions”. It is easy to notice that the true one will be true if it turns out to be useful and it will be convenient therefore to believe in it.

William James seems to have a psychological view of the problems of knowing or cognition. Our faith makes a view true. “Person X believes the judgment is true”. Through our acceptance, we take theories for granted. The longer we will be convinced of the idea's usefulness, the longer it will be true. A similar conception of truth in the doctrines of the Scientologist church, where according to its founder Ronald Hubbard, the truth for you is what you believe, is true. You do not have to believe in Scientology but you have to find your truth, the truth that will be good for you.

Pragmatism principle was to James “an interpretation of all kinds of thought through drawing the right practical consequences (James, 1907). A Pragmatic principle was a tool for understanding and comparing different conceptions. The practical consequence of the view is the whole of the relation between an outlook and individual consciousness or rather lots of much separate consciousness. However, if we cannot translate certain ideas into concrete experience language, they have to be rejected as being cognitively empty. Practical consequences for William James are always concrete and individual. There are no abstractive, general practical consequences. They always exist “for someone”, for individual consciousness.

Moreover, they are not the same for everybody. Pragmatism in its depiction of truth meets the human being halfway (James, 1907). It is a simplified thinking system, perfectly adjusted to the human being's needs but the one from the street, someone who hates theory and desires to achieve practical benefits immediately (James, 1907).

The American system of education places emphasis on practical thinking rather than theoretical. Theoretical thinking requires more knowledge and its practical application and so, it is more difficult. The core of this American system is the ability to acquire knowledge and its practical application. Moreover, it is good to know what is useful, and what should be known in practice and then you can supplement your education as far as you need it.

Such a model of education while it makes Americans extremely creative in thinking, does not mean that they do not make mistakes. Pragmatism, as mentioned before, has a big advantage in that it gives the right to make mistakes and to correct them, while the strict doctrine tries to foresee all possible circumstances.

In William James' consideration and thinking about the world, we use many ways, but the most popular is common sense, which is also called realism. Its virtue is comfort

and transparency in characterizing the world. Common sense is based on everyday experience, tradition, and authority. Theory can be in agreement with common sense in such a way that it considers its application in recurrent actions. This way of thinking is fully adjusted to the individual's needs and changing circumstances in this world. People have gotten different needs so they apply different methods of satisfying them. Emotional, intellectual, and practical needs, which are an inherent element of human life often, push a man to discover such forms of activity, which are most right for him.

The “usefulness” James wrote about, in the contemporary world has a very important position in people's lives and their everyday matters. A lack of users does not attract our attention and we forget about it very quickly when something has no meaning to us. When we perform different activities, it gives us a very bad impression, experiences, and emotions but not necessarily without “useful” consequences. These consequences have a good influence on our further behavior. It means that if we do something wrong and the consequences are unpleasant at the same time they will lead us in the future if only we draw the right conclusions.

William James insists that searching for the truth was a certain habit of action. Such habits give us what we want and lead us to where we want to get. It is worth mentioning here, that owning the truth was also a tool for proper and effective action. Theories became the instruments and the tools, which served to link and systematize observing sentences and calculate which make occurring of certain events prognosis possible, events which are described by the observing sentences. According to William James' Pragmatism, the value of an idea is dependent upon its usefulness in the practical world rather than its absolute truth.

The pragmatic theory of truth is unique amongst its peers and stands as one of the most innovative and subsequently criticized theories of truth currently formulated. Deriving from what is often seen by many philosophers as an extremely subjective philosophy, the Pragmatic Theory of Truth states that a belief is true as far as it fulfills some role or achieves some particular result and that it remains true only insofar as it continues to yield beneficial results relative to our circumstances.

CRITIQUE OF THE PRAGMATIC THEORY OF TRUTH

Two major critics of the theory (Russell, 2013), Bertrand Russell and Hillary Putman each raised independent objections to this assertion, each of particularly serious importance. Russell on his part takes issue with the allegedly subjective aspects of the pragmatic theory of truth, inferring that numerous inherently untrue or even immoral actions can be justified by the Pragmatists' definitions of truth. Likewise, (Putman, 2013) raised his criticism, that being the necessity of relevant 'consequences' to an action or state of affairs means that there are numerous areas of the past that constitute potentially 'essentially evidence – transcendent truths'. In the meantime, the advocator of pragmatic theory purports that the majority of these and other criticism leveled against the pragmatic theory of truth are just misinterpretations of what is meant by the pragmatic theory of truth and how it relates to the rest of the world, including what is referred to as “the fact” (James 1907). It is this major partition that the pragmatists insist upon between facts and truths, with the emphasis that truths need to be relevant rather than independent of those creating them. Here lies the greatest strength of the pragmatic theory of truth. That is its ability to

remain dynamic and fluctuating according to the real-world application of new knowledge and information while allowing for realistic criteria for lasting if not permanent, truths.

The pragmatic theory of truth has undergone several iterations (repetitions) in its lifespan, though certain elements remain consistent and constant throughout all formulations. One of these iterations is that Pragmatism has its root in fallibilism and the development of truth as new and contradictory evidence becomes known. Fallibilism is the acceptance that despite our best efforts, there is no single truth that can be said to be true with total certainty until every single avenue of investigation has been exhausted and until the last man has had his say and contributed his share. As such, pragmatists regard truth as a developing project that is likely impossible to complete. This does not prevent relevant truths from being formulated, however, as the purpose of truth is now constructive rather than reflective of the base state of the world (Dewey, 2013).

Another iteration is the location of truth as an internal, human state rather than external objective quality of the world. William James uses the example of constellations in the night sky to demonstrate this point, stating that while the stars “suffer us” to impose our unique order on their formations in the sky, they are never the fewer ideas that have relevance only relative to the human observer who takes them into account (James, 1909). Truth thus becomes something that is known, thought, or said about reality, and consequently constitutes numerically an additional to it.

The necessity for truths to have some form of agreement with reality is still a key aspect of the pragmatic definition of truth, as it is with all theories of truth, though it is clear that what is meant by pragmatists by this phrase is substantially different. The most objectionable aspect of this theory comes from James' insistence that a reality independent of human thinking is not simply difficult to find, but impossible. Instead, the pragmatists differentiate truth from the facts of the matter, by examining whether the beliefs regarding the object or state of affairs in question will have any meaningful practical consequences for those who are addressing that state of affairs.

However, Bertrand Russell believes that the pragmatic theory of truth fails to offer sufficient grounds for refusing certain moral truths that he regards as standing on higher, universal grounds. Bertrand Russell's objections to the pragmatic theory of truth can best be summarized as moral objections rather than metaphysical ones. His criticism is twofold. Firstly, he believes that James' theory of truth allows for any belief to be held as true as long as it “pays to believe”, regardless of even the facts of the matter. This for Russell has unacceptable consequences for both moral standards and simple factual statements (Russell, 2013). The moral objection is that given the right combination of circumstances and enough consensus amongst a population, any idea can be found to be correct. In this case, Russell himself made two mistakes. The first is the assumption that any human population of sufficient diversity would find a set of beliefs that guides the action of a person or group. James and contemporary Neo-pragmatism Richard Rorty emphasizes that any pragmatic moral theory must necessarily encompass as many perspectives as possible to be truly workable in a long-term way necessitated by any effective pragmatic truth (Rorty, n.d)

Secondly, Russell makes the mistake of assuming that moral values have some source outside of the social moral codes that are created and enforced by a given

community (Russell, 2013). He believes that a theory of truth such as pragmatism that appeals to social rather than objective ground for morality is inherently doomed to result in a 'might is right' paradigm with no standards of ascertaining right from wrong. However, given the pragmatic requirement for any truth to be vetted by its continued functioning "in the long and overall", it seems unlikely that any moral theory based on the Pragmatic Theory of Truth would fail to meet the criteria of serving the best interests of as many human beings as possible. Moreover, those that do not would be swiftly abandoned or else forced out of favor by those they fail to take account of.

While Russell's moral arguments against the Pragmatic Theory of Truth appear to be largely based on his distaste for the idea of non-objective morality, the underlying argument against Pragmatism is that Pragmatism allows for such a plurality of truths as to be functionally useless. Further criticism from James' work expands Russell's objections further, that if satisfaction of a desired end is all that is necessary to have a true belief, then how do we account for pleasing beliefs with erroneous facts or dissatisfactory beliefs that coincide with fact? However, both of these arguments rest on a similar mistake because pragmatism has never made the argument that truth is independent of facts, only that truth is made relative to both the facts and our needs and interests.

In the case of Russell's objection, the pragmatist would respond that the only reason why both beliefs would be seen as equally valid is that there is no definitive fact, that would otherwise invalidate one side as a candidate for truth, nor is there any great upshot to one belief over the other. In response to these objections, James believed that it is the same "inherent relation to the reality of a belief that gives us that specific truth satisfaction," and that any view that contradicts the factual basis of reality would be a belief that would not even survive its first test of validity on the empirical method. (James, 1908) Thus, Russell's objection to Pragmatism on the grounds of its rejection of factual reality stems from a misunderstanding of how pragmatists define the relation between facts and truths.

CONCLUSION

Despite the various objections leveled against the Pragmatic Theory Truth, its strengths are far better situated to overcoming the criticism of Bertrand Russell and Hillary Putman. Pragmatic theory and its emphasis on the distinction between facts and truths, and its important emphasis on fallibilism are the key undertones of the Pragmatic Theory of Truth. The Pragmatic Theory of Truth can maintain a cohesive view of the truth as a goal-oriented view of the fact of the world for which different criteria for validity apply and which allows for a more realistic sense of what a true belief is versus other objective theories. Despite these advantages, many remain skeptical still that the Pragmatic Theory of Truth is workable, particularly regarding the criticisms raised over its supposed inability to deal with truths regarding the past. Howbeit, these criticisms seem to be more emotional than substantive

In addition, another major strength of the Pragmatic Theory of Truth is its flexibility, which allows truth never to be above the suspicions of knowledge and evidence that might prove contrary. In many respects, this is as well a source of some apparent discomfort for some critics. It seems, therefore, that the major fault with the Pragmatic Theory of Truth is its inability to accommodate the standard of objective truths

that other theories have promised, it is however problematic.

Finally, it is instructive to maintain despite all criticisms that the Pragmatic Theory of Truth is a theory that understands the role of human goals and is genuinely interested in interpreting knowledge that is the continuing necessity for opening and expanding the dialogue to find ever more useful truths in a changing world. It is by objective measurements probably well suited to accomplish this unique role

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