

PLATO Essay Contest Winners

SECOND PLACE WINNER

A Defense of the Correspondence Theory of Truth

Michael Wang, 11th grade, Syosset High School, New York

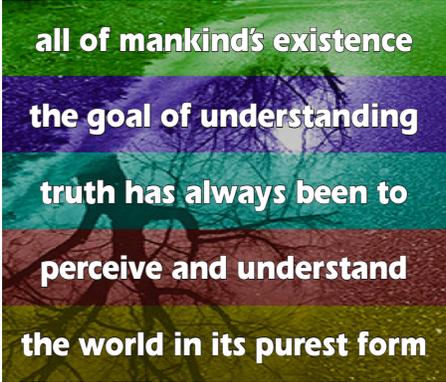
Truth has been and still is at the core of philosophical discussions—man has always sought to understand and define truth. And there is no question why—a property that imbues some words with normative force while generating disrespect for others in its absence, truth is fundamental to persuading others to share your views and to explaining the world around us. Furthermore, there has always been something appealing about believing in truth, a transcendental quality that relieves humans of worry and doubt, whether it be scientific, religious, etc. Today, in an increasingly polarized world with various forms of knowledge production, some of which are faulty, the task of understanding truth has become more important. We need to know what constitutes truth and how to distinguish truthful claims from false ones.

The definition of truth is elusive and difficult to pinpoint with words. So to begin to determine what constitutes truth, we must define the vocabulary that will be used in the following arguments and clarify a few characteristics of truth. First, I define the term “proposition,” which will be used interchangeably with “belief,” as a statement expressing a judgment that may be true or false. Second, I define the term “fact” as a “*sui generis* type of entity in which objects exemplify properties or stand in relations” (Mulligan and Correia). In regards to the characteristics of truth, first, truth exists in opposition to falsity. Denying the possibility of falsity would not only contradict the basis of our discussion, but oppose all existing laws of logic and science. Consequently, our aim is not just to establish the features of truth, but to distinguish truth from falsity, something which I believe makes deflationary theories of truth deficient. Second, truth is a property of beliefs or propositions. Consider a pile of snow, independent of the rest of the world. When we observe the snow, there is no truth-bearer; we simply see snow. Although we may make true judgments about the snow, the snow in and of itself possesses no truth-value. When we introduce a person to the scenario to claim snow is white, however, truth exists because we can ascribe truth-value to that proposition. Third, truth is not intrinsic to a proposition. In other words, we cannot contemplate the proposition snow is white and reveal the source of its truth-value; the proposition is true because of something extrinsic to itself. Consider the same proposition, independent of the rest of the world. We can-

not examine the proposition alone and discover truth because we know of neither snow nor its color. Only when we introduce white snow do we understand the original proposition to be true. Thus, truth exists in a relation between propositions or beliefs and some external entities.

For the correspondence theory of truth, those external entities are facts. To clarify, the theory makes the ontological claim that a proposition is true if and only if some fact exists that corresponds to the proposition. The question now becomes: why facts? At least for realists, the answer is intuitive. The realists see the world as existing objectively, independent of humanity. This world is the world of facts and so, when we describe this world, we are truthful. Consider a blue flower: when I believe the flower is blue, my belief is true. Imagine that I am now born color-blind, and the flower appears grey to me. Only when I believe the

flower is blue is my belief true because the flower’s blueness is a fact, regardless of what I see. Thus, convincing one to side with the realists is perhaps the simplest way to warrant the final part of the correspondence theory. However, reconciling ideological differences between realists and anti-realists is a separate matter. Nonetheless, I still believe the correspondence theory to be sufficient for all. First, assuming we are idealists who hold that the world of the realists is unknowable



to humanity because reality is constructed mentally, the correspondence theory is not disproven. The theory only establishes a set of conditions necessary for truth; we strive to identify facts, but whether or not we succeed is insignificant to truth’s existence. Second, for the anti-realists who deny an objective reality independent of humanity entirely, we only need to redefine what constitutes a fact. A fact then becomes the next objective entity in the anti-realists’ reality and we derive truth-value by establishing correspondence between propositions and these new “facts.” Thus, to summarize, the project of discovering truth holds describing the world in its purest, most objective sense as its ultimate goal. Furthermore, a belief or proposition is true if and only if it corresponds to some fact.

Equipped with the correspondence theory of truth, we have a means of answering all the questions raised in “The Riverboat Trip.” When Mark makes his first judgment, he

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is correct to say: “What I said was true ‘cause water’s really wet.” His belief about water being wet is true because it corresponds to the fact that water is wet. However, when asked how he knows his trip to China was a dream, Harry’s answer is less satisfying. Harry claims that he could not have traveled to China in a night because “what happened in the dream wasn’t consistent with everything else in my life.” Let us represent Harry’s proposition as: I traveled to China last night. When proving the proposition false, Harry applies the coherence theory of truth, which states, “A belief is true if and only if it is part of a coherent system of beliefs” (Glanzberg). Imagine that the night before, Harry did not venture to China, and he slept without moving. Although the coherence theory allows Harry to make the correct judgment in this instance, Harry was fortunate. Consider the following case: during that night, Harry dreams a different dream. In this dream, Harry finds himself in his bed. His room is perfectly in order and the lights are off. He gets up to drink a glass of water and returns to bed. Beyond that, Harry remembers nothing. When he wakes up, Harry believes that he did wake up to drink that glass of water, when he never did. Both situations cohere with everything else in Harry’s life, but he falsely believes that he drank the glass of water. This case elucidates an overarching issue with the coherence theory of truth: multiple propositions may cohere with our system of beliefs and it becomes impossible to discern truth from falsity. For instance, it is conceivable that a storyteller weave a tale of our history that coheres with all of our present beliefs, but remains fictitious. Instead, the aforementioned proposition is false because it does not correspond with some fact; the fact that Harry traveled to China does not exist because he remained in bed all night.

As the riverboat trip continues, the students evaluate the truth-value of the proposition “If we follow the stream, we’ll come back to the mansion.” Lisa encourages the group to follow the river and when it actually leads them back to the mansion, she claims, “We tried it out, and sure enough, we found our way back to the mansion! Don’t you see? Our idea was true because it worked!” Lisa determines the proposition to be true by utilizing the pragmatist’s theory of truth, which states, “Truth is satisfactory to believe” (Glanzberg). However, Lisa’s approach instinctively appears defective in various ways. First, it appears to be describing the utility of a proposition, not its truth-value. Truth should not be subjective. Second, the theory devolves to the correspondence theory. In other words, it is most useful to believe in propositions that correspond with facts because belief in reality allows us to make accurate predictions, understand our world, etc. (Note that the same argument applies to the coherence theory: propositions that correspond with facts cohere with factual beliefs about the world. We are unable to test the coherence of our first belief because no beliefs exist for it to cohere to.

In order to avoid a defective original belief, the foundation for our web of beliefs should be grounded in reality, where facts already exist in coherence with other facts.) Third, grounding the truth-value of a proposition in the consequence of the proposition, its utility, is infinitely regressive. If we posit some proposition x , to prove it true, we would need to test it to see if it “worked.” However, we would also need to prove the proposition x worked true. Accordingly, we would need to test the new proposition to see if it “worked,” and so on and so forth. The correspondence theory resolves the regress because proposition x is true regardless of the consequences of believing x . Beyond these general faults, careful analysis of Lisa’s argument further discredits the pragmatist theory. When Lisa claims her proposition “worked,” she uses the term “worked” to represent being led back to the mansion. In other words, the aforementioned proposition is true if the students are successfully led to the mansion and false if they are not. However, this notion of testing a belief for usefulness is unnecessary; Lisa only believes it to be because she and the other students lack knowledge of their whereabouts. The usefulness of the students’ proposition has been predetermined because either the stream exists in such a way that it leads to the mansion or it does not. If it is a fact that the stream leads to the mansion, the students’ corresponding proposition is made true. As a result, Tony and Mark are correct when they exclaim, “No, it [the idea] worked because it was true!” not the other way around.

Reflecting upon “The Riverboat Trip,” we see that the correspondence theory provides an account of truth that is both objective and universal in all situations, as truth should be. To provide another example, we know a scientific theory to be true when it corresponds to some fact. Centuries ago, the geocentric model of the solar system was widely accepted as true. It was coherent with scientists’ observations of stars and planets in the sky and it was useful to believe in the fields of astronomy, religion, etc. However, we now view the heliocentric model as true because it is a fact that the planets of our solar system revolve around the sun. Although such cases illustrate why the correspondence theory is the only theory that answers all questions of truth sufficiently, it still receives significant criticism, independent of competitive theories. One popular objection is articulated as follows: “Although they [correspondence theories] apply to truths from some domains of discourse, e.g., the domain of science, they fail for others, e.g. the domain of morality: there are no moral facts” (David). However, I do not believe that the objection is responsive to the thesis of the theory. Depending on one’s stance on other philosophical issues, responses to the objection vary. First, for the noncognitivists, claims about domains other than reality cannot be true in the first place because such truths are nonexistent. Second, for the reductionists, facts from domains that the objection considers problematic are simply unproblematic

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facts in disguise. For instance, moral truths do not exist independently, but are justified by social-behavioral facts (David). Third, one may simply welcome the objection as unresponsive because truths like moral facts do exist, so the correspondence theory still functions.

Presented with the three main theories of truth, correspondence, coherence, and pragmatist, the above essay offers a defense of the correspondence theory. For all of mankind's existence, the goal of understanding truth has always been to perceive and understand the world in its purest form. We all rely on truth to understand the mechanics of the universe, like Mark, to identify lies, like Harry, and to make decisions, like Lisa. The correspondence theory provides that robust account of reality we desire.

Works Cited

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Can anyone know the future?

THIRD PLACE WINNER

A Contextual Theory of Truth

Tianyi Maio, 11th grade, Indian Springs School, Alabama

What is truth? To qualify as a good answer, the definition should be broad enough to fully capture our intuition, specific enough to eliminate any ambiguity, and practical enough to be useful in our lives. In this essay, I shall propose a contextual theory of truth, which defines truth in relation to a conceivable world specified in context. I will begin by examining the correspondence theory, the coherence theory, and the pragmatic theory. These neoclassical theories reveal important intuitions about truth, but they all face unresolved objections. I will show that the contextual theory not only fits our intuition and resolves these objections, but is also useful for mathematics, literature, and hypothetical worlds. I shall conclude by illustrating that the contextual theory offers useful guidance for knowledge.

At first glance, the definition of truth seems obvious: truth is the correspondence to a fact. According to a survey in 2009, 44.9 percent of contemporary philosophers accept or lean towards the correspondence theory, making it

the most prevalent philosophical view on truth (Bourget). It reveals an important aspect of our intuition: we believe that there are absolute facts underlying our reality, and for a proposition to be true, it must correspond to this system of absolute facts. However, the correspondence theory is not free of objections. Firstly, now that we define truth in terms of facts, how should we define "facts"? Ambiguous definitions of facts, such as "the way our reality is," only set off a chain of infinite regress. For instance, how should we define "reality" then? Secondly, even if we accept our intuition of facts as irreducible axioms, a skeptic may still argue that since we can never know facts for certain, we have no way to ascertain truth, so the correspondence theory is useless. Thirdly, the correspondence theory cannot adequately determine truth in hypothetical worlds, which are expressed by counterfactual statements like "if Lincoln had not been assassinated, he could have finished his term of office." Because a counterfactual premise does not correspond to

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