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A Pragmatic Reconsideration of the Correspondence Theory of Truth

Truth does not appear to be a concept that needs explaining. Obviously, opinions about what is true differ from mind to mind, but rarely do any feel the need to discuss what constitutes truth. Truth is simple. Stating the truth is stating what is the case. If I say it is snowing outside, then I speak the truth if it is in fact, snowing outside. I speak falsehood if it is raining, sunny, or any other condition than snow. This correspondence theory of truth is the most popular, and not for bad reason. Other theories of truth, attempt to reframe our language and our methods of reasoning with sincere implications on our conduct. The theory of truth which I operate under is the pragmatic theory of truth developed by William James and others. Simply put, the pragmatic theory calls truth the good in the way of belief. There is in some sense, infinite irreconcilable ways to conceive of the world. The pragmatic theory of truth sorts between these by realizing what of the many options is a good or useful thing to believe. "The true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, too, for definite, assignable reasons." (James 37)

How are we still left with the old correspondence theory of truth? It still seems intuitive. If it was not true would that mean that something could be true and not cohere with reality? Famed correspondence theory holder, Bertrand Russell, has this to say on James' theory of truth.

"Suppose you want to know whether Columbus crossed the Atlantic in 1492. You must not, as other people do, look it up in a book. You must first inquire what are the effects of this belief, and how they differ from the effects of believing that he sailed in 1491 or 1493.... Apart from examinations I cannot think of any practical effects of the belief except in the case of the historian." (Russell 818)

The pragmatic theory of truth seems to have left something out here. There very well may be a body of facts that we can consider true, that do not have any relevance to our immediate life. Here is James on the topic of the correspondence theory.

“Truth, as any dictionary will tell you, is a property of certain of our ideas. It means their 'agreement,' as falsity means their disagreement, with reality. Pragmatists and intellectualists both accept this definition as a matter of course. They begin to quarrel only after the question is raised as to what may precisely be meant by the term 'agreement,' and what by the term 'reality,' when reality is taken as something for our ideas to agree with.” (James 96)

Is it not possible however, that a similar issue might occur with the correspondence theory? If a statement or belief, is one step off from reality it is considered false. If a belief is held to be true but is shown false, the method of reasoning that produced it is considered moot. If there are two reasonable but contradictory claims to truth, the question of which one is real cannot be answered. Most metaphysical questions, James claims can be solved using the pragmatic method.

What I want to answer in the following paragraphs is this question: How can pragmatism be the best theory of truth if it seems to exclude those things that the correspondence theory can consider true and seem to correspond with reality? My answer is to pragmatically reconsider to the correspondence theory of truth. In other words, how would it affect our practice and when it is appropriate to apply the correspondence theory?

As I have explained, I don't believe that the correspondence theory can function at the bottom or as a fundamental level of the nature of truth. It can only exist in reference to other things which we hold to be pragmatically true. For example, we believe in space for its pragmatic implications. If we did not, we could not conceive of material experience at all. How then do we define space? Space is a 3-dimensional coordinate system in which objects “inhabit”. Space is a framework that we can operate under. Here the correspondence theory of truth is brought in to use. We can state that an object inhabits a certain point in space, and then be true or false. The correspondence theory does not need to claim a truth cohere to a fundamental reality, but to our framework's “truth”. The correspondence theory cannot present reality, but it can present “spatial truth”, “temporal truth”, and going deeper “social truth” or “religious truth”.

How can we then answer the question that Russel proposed? How are the minute details of Columbus' Voyage of any pragmatic relevance to us? Stating that Columbus sailed in 1492 as opposed to 1491 or 1493 is still a good idea under the pragmatic conception of truth as it allows us to keep our other beliefs which are relevant safe from attack. We can say that the fact of Columbus Voyage occurring in 1492 to be spatially true, temporally true, and in some broad sense historically true. Columbus' Voyage's timing as a lone fact has little relevance to our action today, but as a member of the choir of our facts it has great relevance. It has relevance in that we want to remain holding our idea of how events flow from

one to the next, how travel over space works, how discoveries impact world events, how to square our historical views with those of others, and so on. James makes a similar point, “It means, they say, nothing but this, that ideas (which themselves are but parts of our experience) become true just in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience, to summarize them and get about among them by conceptual shortcuts instead of following the interminable succession of particular phenomena.” (James 58)

The vocabulary which I propose to make these considerations simpler is one of modules. The pragmatists mind is inhabited by a series of frameworks upon which they want to interpret and shelve away their facts. Each one of these may be called a module, and an interesting game can be played between them. They function like a Venn Diagram would. Some modules only contain facts relative to their own framing while some must cross with others to understand the full conception of a fact. For example, the intersection of the temporal, spatial, and material might be called the physical. Another interesting side note is what one would call the module that contains all other modules (How ironic). I propose to call it the religious module as it is the framework under which all frameworks can be understood. Whatever a man calls his God is the ruler of the religious module. Perhaps even, someone could have multiple religious modules resulting in some sort of epistemological polytheism? Another topic for another time.

I hope to have here described what makes the pragmatic theory ready and willing to accept the intuition that the correspondence theory calls forth. The correspondence theory can still be used in nearly all of the old ways it was before, except as a claim to the foundation of the concept of truth. The pragmatic theory of truth still has to be used as a way to deal with the modules as they relate to one another and how each one should be conceived. When we are living in the world our modules have created, correspondence is king, but when we truly have to reflect on the way in which we conceive our frameworks of correspondence pragmatism is a superior method.

Works Cited:

1. James, William. *Pragmatism*. Renaissance Classics, 2012.
2. Russell, Bertrand. *The History of Western Philosophy*. New York: Touchstone, 2007.