The Coherence Theory of Truth

One of the new theories that emerged as a result of these criticisms directed to the theory of correspondence is 'consistency theory'. According to this view, truth should be sought within the propositions, not in relation to other existences; the consistency of the proposition with other relevant information or statements is the accuracy of the proposition.

Propositions are verifiable not by 'reality' but by comparing propositions like themselves. At the heart of this idea is the argument that no raw phenomenon exists. No phenomenon stands alone and absolutely in front of the subject. Therefore, propositions cannot be verified based on facts. The absence of raw phenomena means that only one case is revealed in its relationship with other cases. Secondly, it is asserted that there is no difference between a case and the correct judgment regarding it. In the context of the case, there is no difference between the fact that "it is snowing" and the "it is snowing" proposition as long as the proposition is true.

For the subject, if there is no difference between the fact and the correct expression about the case, and if each case is revealed only in its relationship with other cases, the expressions can also be controlled in their relations with other expressions. According to F. Bradley, "truth is an ideal expression of the universe, which is both consistent and comprehensive at the same time. Truth should not contradict in itself, it should include all explanations. In short, full truth should realize a whole string design. Such a whole… essentially has two features: consistency and comprehensiveness."

According to Blanshard, "what actually tests a judgment is the entire accepted world associated with that judgment. If this world collapses, this judgment will collapse with it. This is the name of this test path is consistency. "

In the theory of coherence, the question of how to determine the truth of the first propositions that are the basis of the statements made on the subject creates another discussion. The acceptance that these initial propositions, when stuck in a string, are essentially unverifiable and unfalsifiable, undermines the reliability of general-valid truth claims.

However, the distinction between truth and absolute and the removal of absolute from being an imperative condition for truth will eliminate such anxiety. The important point here is what is meant in the expression "x statement is true". When it is said in the classical theory of correspondence that "the proposition x is correct", it means "the proposition x is true only if

there is a p phenomenon it expresses". However, if there is no raw p case to be faced, if p phenomenon is revealed in its relationship with other cases and there is no difference between the proposition that expresses p correctly, then the following result is reached:

The truth of the "x proposition" lies in the coherence of x with the other propositions in the comprehensive array. In addition, it is problematic to test past propositions, in other words, propositions about cases or situations that do not exist simultaneously with the person who voiced the proposition, according to the theory of correspondence. According to those who advocate the theory of coherence, even in the theory of correspondence, the truth test of such propositions is already based on consistency. Thus, in the theory of correspondence, the definition of "truth" and testing of truth differ from each other. Otherwise, everything will have to be rejected except for things that are perceived directly. The suitability of the experience to the case cannot be known without revealing the pure case and comparing the two sides (proposition and case).

This comparison is always problematic; first of all, the comparison process cannot be made from a third point other than proposition by separating from 'propositions'.

Secondly, it is not possible to face pure phenomenon. A proposition such as "snow is white" requires the definition of the terms "snow" and "white" as well as the terms of associating the term "white" with the term "snow". Their determination requires knowing other terms and relationships. When the consistency between all of these does not contradict this last proposition, this proposition will take its true value. The theory of consistency combines the definition of accuracy with the test of accuracy, or addresses the application of 'truth', in other words, the problem of 'truth criterion'. However, it is thought that what is perceived directly is not raw facts, but integrity related to other facts, and in such an environment, it is stated that testing is a consistency test with other propositions or proposal sequences.

Summary:

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A coherence theory of truth states that the truth of any (true) proposition consists in its coherence with some specified set of propositions. The coherence theory differs from its principal competitor, the correspondence theory of truth, in two essential respects. The competing theories give conflicting accounts of the relation that propositions bear to their truth conditions. (In this article, 'proposition' is not used in any technical sense. It simply refers to the bearers of truth values, whatever they may be.) According to one, the relation is coherence, according to the other, it is correspondence. The two theories also give conflicting accounts of truth conditions. According to the coherence theory, the truth conditions of propositions consist in other propositions. The correspondence theory, in contrast, states that the truth conditions of propositions are not (in general) propositions, but rather objective features of the world. (Even the correspondence theorist holds that propositions about propositions have propositions as their truth conditions.) Although the coherence and correspondence theories are fundamentally opposed in this way, they both present (in contrast to deflationary theories of truth) a substantive conception of truth. That is, unlike deflationary theories, the coherence and correspondence theories both hold that truth is a property of propositions that can be analysed in terms of the sorts of truth-conditions propositions have, and the relations propositions stand in to these conditions.

Versions of the Coherence Theory of Truth

The coherence theory of truth has several versions. These versions differ on two major issues. Different versions of the theory give different accounts of the coherence relation. Different varieties of the theory also give various accounts of the set (or sets) of propositions with which true propositions cohere. (Such a set will be called a specified set.)

According to some early versions of the coherence theory, the coherence relation is simply consistency. On this view, to say that a proposition coheres with a specified set of propositions is to say that the proposition is consistent with the set. This account of coherence is unsatisfactory for the following reason. Consider two propositions which do not belong to a specified set. These propositions could both be consistent with a specified set and yet be

inconsistent with each other. If coherence is consistency, the coherence theorist would have to claim that both propositions are true, but this is impossible.

A more plausible version of the coherence theory states that the coherence relation is some form of entailment. Entailment can be understood here as strict logical entailment, or entailment in some looser sense. According to this version, a proposition coheres with a set of propositions if and only if it is entailed by members of the set. Another more plausible version of the theory, held for example in Bradley (1914), is that coherence is mutual explanatory support between propositions.

The second point on which coherence theorists (coherentists, for short) differ is the constitution of the specified set of propositions. Coherentists generally agree that the specified set consists of propositions believed or held to be true. They differ on the questions of who believes the propositions and when. At one extreme, coherence theorists can hold that the specified set of propositions is the largest consistent set of propositions currently believed by actual people. For such a version of the theory, see Young (1995). According to a moderate position, the specified set consists of those propositions which will be believed when people like us (with finite cognitive capacities) have reached some limit of inquiry. For such a coherence theory, see Putnam (1981). At the other extreme, coherence theorists can maintain that the specified set contains the propositions which would be believed by an omniscient being. Some idealists seem to accept this account of the specified set.

If the specified set is a set actually believed, or even a set which would be believed by people like us at some limit of inquiry, coherentism involves the rejection of realism about truth. Realism about truth involves acceptance of the principle of bivalence (according to which every proposition is either true or false) and the principle of transcendence (which says that a proposition may be true even though it cannot be known to be true). Coherentists who do not believe that the specified set is the set of propositions believed by an omniscient being are committed to rejection of the principle of bivalence since it is not the case that for every proposition either it or a contrary proposition coheres with the specified set. They reject the principle of transcendence since, if a proposition coheres with a set of beliefs, it can be known to cohere with the set.

Source: https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/truth-coherence/

Discussion Text:

Interpretation, meaning and skepticism (Davidson, "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge")

Imagine you wake up one day to find yourself in an utterly unfa- miliar situation. You have no idea where you are or how you got here. The noontime sun is punishingly hot. You're uncomfortable, hungry, and thirsty. You slowly gaze around the unfamiliar country- side, shake your head in disbelief, and settle down on a nearby boulder in a thicket of trees to contemplate your situation. Before long you hear voices, distant and faint at first, but closer and clearer with each passing moment. The voices come from a small band of men traveling down the savannah along the forest's edge. Equipped with bow and arrow, they're obviously a hunting party. You're dis- appointed to hear that they speak a language utterly unfamiliar to you. You can't understand a word. Not knowing what to expect from them, you lie low and observe them. As they round the bend, their faces turn white as chalk. After an instant of stunned silence, they point energetically and yell, "Flarg! Flarg!," then dash madly for the trees and clamber up. "What's this all about?" you wonder as you shuffle sideways to get a look at what scared them so: a huge hippopotamus charging toward them! Apparently, they had sur- prised it while it was grazing. They keep track of it carefully while up in their perch, frequently pointing to it and saying, "Flarg." After it's gone, they creep down and continue on their way. You follow along behind for the remainder of the day. (They notice you but don't seem to care.) Whenever a hippo is in view, whether it be swimming, walking, grazing, or charging, they point and say "flarg," but otherwise they never say "flarg."

Let's reflect for a moment on what you would make of these peo- ple. In particular, how would you interpret the word "flarg?" And what beliefs would you attribute to them?

The best interpretation of "flarg" is that it means "hippo," because they appear to use it to refer to hippos, and only to hippos. Understanding "flarg" to mean "hippo" makes their assertions turn out true. But why not interpret "flarg" to mean "biscuit" or "pencil" or "lily?" Because that would be extraordinarily uncharitable – you'd then be interpreting them as making false assertions every time they pointed and uttered "flarg."

What beliefs you attribute to them depends on their behavior. When they point and say "flarg," you understand them to be expressing their belief that there's a hippo. When they flee from a charging hippo, you understand them to believe that a hippo is charging, and that a charging hippo poses a threat. (You conse- quently attribute to them a fear of charging hippos.) When they climb up the tree, you understand them to believe that climbing a tree is a way to escape the threat. (You also attribute to them a desire to

not be injured, or else their escaping behavior makes no sense.) When they climb down after the hippo is no longer in sight, you understand them to believe that the hippo is gone and no longer threatens them. You also attribute to them belief in all the obvious and relevant consequences of all the beliefs just mentioned.

Notice something important: all the beliefs we just mentioned are true. You don't attribute false beliefs to them. You would not attribute to them the belief that a ground squirrel is charging, nor the belief that the hippo approaches to invite them to dinner, nor the belief that trees are lethally toxic to the touch. Of course, you might find it necessary to attribute some false beliefs to them as you follow them around all day. For example, suppose you knew that a maimed and emaciated adolescent elephant was approaching unseen by the group. Recently its ears and trunk were, tragically, cut off by vicious hooligans, making it impossible for it to nourish itself. Consequently, from afar it looks very much like a hippo. The hunters notice it from afar, scream "Flarg!," and head for the treetops again. In this case, you'd attribute to them the false belief that the animal is a hippo. But notice that this false belief is reasonable. It makes sense given the true background beliefs you attribute to them about a hippo's appearance, along with the true beliefs you attribute to them about the observable properties of the animal in question.

Notice something else important: you also attribute a well-rounded, consistent, and coherent set of beliefs to them. Because you attribute the belief that a hippo is charging, you also attribute the belief that an animal is charging, that hippos exist, that hippos can charge, etc. Because you attribute the belief that trees are nontoxic, you avoid attributing the belief that trees are toxic, or the belief that trees are probably toxic, or the suspicion that they are toxic.

To sum up, we find ourselves interpreting others' beliefs as being mostly true, reasonable, and coherent. A thoroughgoing principle of charity informs our interpretation. We came to this conclusion by studying a simple example of what Donald Davidson calls "radical interpretation." Radical interpretation occurs when we need to, as they say, "start from scratch" in understanding others. This would happen if we knew neither what their words meant nor what they believed. The example about the hippos was like this.

That's all very interesting, but how does it apply to epistemology? The application comes in two stages.

First, at least in the central and most basic cases, we as interpreters must "take the objects of a belief to be the causes of that belief." Of course, that's just a methodological statement about

how inter- pretation must proceed: we must interpret beliefs as being mostly true. But Davidson says its significance goes far beyond that, because the way an interpreter must understand belief is the way beliefs must be. The content of a set of beliefs must mostly reflect what causes them. This doesn't guarantee that all beliefs are true. But it does guarantee that most beliefs must be true, so any particular belief is at least likely to be true. "Belief is in its nature veridical," as Davidson puts it.

Second, any being capable of thought is in a position to appreciate that belief is by nature veridical. You need only "reflect" on the nature of belief to accomplish this. This guarantees that all thinkers have available a reason for thinking that their beliefs are mostly true, creating a "presumption in favor" of each particular belief being true. And now the external-world skeptic is in trouble.

We might understand Davidson's basic argument like so:

1. If all thinkers are in a position to know that most of their beliefs must be true, then skeptical worries (about justification, at least) are utterly unmotivated. (Premise)

2. All thinkers are in a position to know that most of their beliefs must be true. (Premise)

3. So skeptical worries are utterly unmotivated. (From 1 and 2)

That's Davidson's main argument in "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge,"[1] but a couple other comparative points are worth mentioning. First, earlier we saw that Sellars thought the nature of concept and language acquisition guaranteed that you were a reli-able believer (§§8–9). Davidson's view resembles Sellars's in this respect: something about the nature of beliefs, concepts, and the like guarantees reliability. And both Davidson and Sellars expressed confidence that all believers could somehow appreciate this impor- tant fact, though in both cases it seems fairly clear that ordinary people do not in fact base their beliefs on any such fact or the sophis- ticated reasoning that reveals it.

Second, earlier we saw BonJour pose a dilemma to foundational- ists who favored the given as the ultimate basis of knowledge (§10). BonJour's dilemma was that the given must be cognitive or noncog- nitive; but if it's cognitive, then, like a belief, it stands in need of justification; and if it's noncognitive, then it cannot justify belief; so either way, the given fails to solve the regress problem. Davidson poses essentially the same dilemma: either sensory experiences can, in

virtue of their content, stand in "logical" relations to beliefs, or they cannot; but if they can, then they "may be lying" and so, like beliefs, we need a reason to trust them; and if they cannot, then although they might be able to "cause" beliefs, they cannot justify them; so either way, foundationalism fails to solve the regress problem and skepticism threatens. This perceived failure of experi- ential foundations leads Davidson to conclude that "nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief." And this motivates him to seek the response to skepticism we reviewed earlier, culminating in the argument 1–3.

Davidson, Donald, "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," pp. 307–19 in Ernest Lepore (ed.), *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson* (New York: Blackwell, 1989). © 1989 by Ernest Lepore.