

**PHIL 470: Seminar: Metaphysics & Epistemology
Truth and Reality**

Handout (11)

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Nicholas Rescher: Truth as Ideal Coherence

Discussion Questions:

1. What is Rescher's *coherence* theory of truth? Do you think his conclusion is too pessimistic? Or do you think he is simply being realistic? Explain your reasons.
2. Rescher claims that under a certain condition, truth as *coherence* and truth as *correspondence* would have a tight link. What is this condition that Rescher considers? Do you agree with him that under this condition coherence will be closely linked to correspondence? Why or why not?
3. What does Rescher mean by "optimal coherence"? What does he mean by "the perfected data base"? Does it matter to his theory whether these conditions will ever obtain?
4. What does Rescher mean by "completeness" and "adequacy" as they apply to the *perfected data base*? How does Rescher combine realism with his thesis of *adequacy* or his notion of *actuality*?
5. Do you agree with Rescher that we don't have the advantage of "God's point of view"? Do you think that lacking this advantage makes it impossible for humans to really acquire *objective* truth? Why or why not?
6. What do you see to be the major difference between the pragmatist theory of truth and the coherence theory of truth?

**Nicholas Rescher:
Truth as ideal Coherence**

§ Introduction

1. It is possible to demonstrate rigorously that truth is tantamount to ideal coherence that a proposition's being true is fact *equivalent* with its being optimally coherent with an ideal data base.
2. Thus the traditional view of truth as accord with fact is thus also available to coherentists.
3. However, the coherence-based inquiries we actually carry out can go only so far as to afford our best available *estimate* of the real truth, not *unqualified* truth.

§ Main Objection:

The standard objection to the coherence theory of factual truth is that the linkage of coherence to truth is simply too loose for coherence to provide the definitive standard of truth.

§ Rescher's Main Thesis:

___ It will be shown here that if one is prepared to consider coherence in an *idealized* perspective – as *optimal* coherence with a *perfected* data base, rather than as a matter of apparent coherence with the imperfect data we actually have in hand – then an essential link between truth and coherence emerges.

___ To validate a coherence criteriology we must be able to show that, at least ideally, if we abstract from the imperfections of messy real-life situations, coherence does indeed get at “the real truth of things.”

§ The Continuity Condition

In deliberating about the truth of our scientific claims, as elsewhere, the gap between the real and the ideal must be acknowledged.

$C(S/f)$ is to stand for: the statement 's' satisfies the truth-criterion C given that circumstances f obtains.

$i(S)$ is to stand for : (epistemically) ideal circumstances with respect to the statement 'S'.

Given these specifications, the *continuity condition* now reads as follows:

If C is to constitute an adequate criterion of truth, then it must be demonstrably the case that for any statement S , the truth of S is tantamount to its satisfying C under ideal evidential conditions with respect to S .

___ True theses are coextensive with criteriologically justified belief in *ideal circumstances*.

If C is to serve as our criterion of truth, then we shall have it that C -satisfaction in the prevailing epistemic circumstances suffices to underwrite acceptance as true:

If $C(S/a)$, when a are the actually prevailing circumstances, then 'S' is true.

Truth ↔ ideally justified belief according to an adequate criterion of truth

But this condition of course only reflects a *practical policy* of ours, inherent in subscribing to C as a criterion of truth: it merely expresses our determination to accept 'S' as true when C is actually satisfied. What is at issue is not a relationship of abstract general principle, but only our adherence to a certain *modus operandi*.

On the other hand, the continuity criterion – 'S' is true iff $C(S/i(S))$ – represents a relationship that must be satisfied *as a matter of conceptual fact*. It must obtain demonstrably on the basis of "general principle" if the truth-condition C is to qualify as adequate.

§ *Optimal Coherence and Perfected Data Base (B)*

The Claim:

___ When ideal coherence is construed in this way, then truth is demonstrably tantamount to ideal coherence:

- I. true \Rightarrow ideally coherent
- II. ideally coherent \Rightarrow true

The idea of "ideal coherence" operative here should be understood as being a matter of *optimal coherence (c)* with a *perfected data base (B)*.

[optimal coherence]

___ Let us say that a factual proposition (S) satisfies the condition of "ideal coherence" if it is *optimally coherent* with a *perfected* (or complete) data base, B .

1. 'S' represents a member of some family of mutually exclusive and exhaustive alternatives ($S_1, S_2, S_3, \dots, S_n$).
2. 'S' is more smoothly co-systematizable with B in this case than any of its alternatives ("~S"), singly or in combination.

[perfected data base] (B)

___ Perfection has two components: *completeness* (or *comprehensiveness*) and *adequacy* (or *definitiveness*):

1. Completeness:

___ If D is to be a *perfected* data-base, then it must be sufficiently complete and comprehensive that, for any thesis 'S' within the domain of the discussion at issue, either S itself or its negation 'not-S' will cohere optimally with D. (There are only two options, and only one of which will cohere with B ← **the law of the excluded middle**.)

2. Adequacy (adequacy to fact):

___ To acknowledge D as a *perfected* data-base is to acknowledge it as actuality-determinative. (If S optimally coheres with D, then S must be actual.)

⇒ What is assumed here is an *ontological* thesis: it claims that that's how things in fact are, *whether or not people know or believe it*.

Completeness requires *decisiveness*; adequacy requires *facticity*.

Note:

___ The very idea of such a unique, perfected data-base represents an idealization. We can never find such a perfected data base in real life. What is being said is claimed in a strictly hypothetical mode: "If a perfected data base exists, then it must *ipso facto* have certain characteristics."

With respect to "optimal coherence" there is in effect (at most) one perfected data base. ⇒ B

By definition, then, B is the (*unique*) perfected data base, whose availability, as already observed, we can claim not as a matter of realizable fact but only as a matter of idealization.

[If you don't get frustrated with symbols, here is his proof]:

As a preliminary, let us first establish the effective *uniqueness* of such a perfected data base in point of optimal coherence. To demonstrate this, let us make the assumption that both B₁ and B₂ to answer to the characterization of a "perfected data base."

We shall establish:

If 'S' c B₁ then 'S' c B₂, for any statement 'S' ("c" = coheres with)

This is accomplished by the following argument:

(1) Suppose: 'S' c B₁

- (2) Suppose further that not: 'S' c B₂
- (3) Then 'not-S' c B₂ follows from (2) by *completeness*
- (4) Then A(not-S) follows from (3) by *Adequacy*
- (5) But A(S) follows from (1) by *Adequacy*
- (6) Since (4) and (5) are mutually contradictory given the Law of Excluded Middle, we must negate supposition (2), and hence have: 'S' c B₂.

The converse of course follows by exactly the same cause of reasoning.

So with respect to “optimal coherence” there is in effect (at most) one perfected data base. ⇒ B

§ Actuality

Actuality must “make up its mind” with respect to the A(S)/A(not-S) dichotomy. This condition inheres axiomatically in the very meaning of “actuality.”

Note: What he means here is that there can't be two *contradictory* statements that are both “actual.”

Thesis (A): 'S' is true ↔ A(S)

It remains to be shown that the ancient principle of accord with fact, ...-- namely, thesis (A) – is also available to the coherentist who... does not propose to *define* truth in this way, so that it is not available to him as a mere truism. Accordingly, we must show that this thesis is itself derivable on coherentist principles....

Let us recall that principle (A) encapsulates the *correspondentist* view of the nature of truth as adequation to fact:

$$(A) \quad \text{'S' is true} \leftrightarrow A(S)$$

On the other hand, principle (C) encapsulates the *coherentist* view of the nature of truth as ideal coherence:

$$(C) \quad \text{'S' is true} \leftrightarrow \text{'S' c B}$$

It follows immediately from the two stipulated requirements of Completeness and Adequacy that B must satisfy the conditions represented by the following principles:

- (P1) By the condition of Adequacy we have it that if 'S' does indeed optimally cohere with B, then this state of affairs must be actual:
- (P2) By the condition of Completeness we have it that if 'S' [does not] cohere optimally with the perfected data base (B), then it follows that 'not-S' will be optimally coherent with the perfected data base B.

Given the explication of "ideal coherence" at issue in the Principles P1 and P2, it emerges that adequationism and Coherentism are effectively coordinated.

§ Conclusion: Why Coherentism

1. Given that "the real truth" is guaranteed only by *ideal* coherence – by optimal coherence with a perfected data base that we do not have, rather than by *apparent* coherence with the sub-optimal data base we actually have in hand – we have no categorical assurance of the actual correctness of our coherence-guided inquiries, and no unqualified guarantee that their deliverances provide "the real truth" that we seek in matters of empirical inquiry.
2. The history of science shows that our "discoveries" about how things work in the world secured through scientific coherentism constantly require adjustment, correction, replacement.
3. We cannot say that our coherence-grounded inductive inquiries provide us with real (definitive) truth, but just that they provide us with *the best estimate* of the truth that we can achieve in the circumstances at hand.
4. Our "knowledge" is... no more than our *best estimate* of the truth of things. Lacking the advantage of a God's eye view, we have no access to the world's facts save through the mediation of (potentially flawed) *inquiry*. All we can do – and what must suffice us because indeed it is *all* that we can do – is to do the best we can in the cognitive state of the art to *estimate* "the correct" answer to our scientific questions.
5. We must pursue the cognitive enterprise of our sciences amid the harsh realities and complexities of an imperfect world. In deliberating about the truth of our scientific claims, as elsewhere, the gap between the real and the ideal must be acknowledged.

[The continuity condition]

