

PHIL 470: Seminar: Metaphysics & Epistemology
Truth and Reality

Handout (12)

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Susan Haack: The Pragmatic Theory of Truth

Discussion Questions:

1. What is deemed *true* by the pragmatists? Does their notion of *truth* fit our commonsensical notion of *truth*? Why or why not?
2. Is there any way for us to verify our beliefs or hypotheses other than through experience? If so, is one compelled to accept the pragmatist theory of truth?
3. What does James mean by the “cash value” of beliefs? How do we verify the cash value of our beliefs? And do we thereby assert their truth or falsehood?
4. What is the “tension” that Haack finds in the pragmatist theory of truth? Is there any way out of this predicament for the pragmatist? Or do you think that this is *the* fatal flaw of the theory?
5. Haack thinks that a major strength of the pragmatist theory of truth is that it “avoids that divorce of the theory of truth from epistemology.” Explain what she means by this claim. Do you agree with her that in this respect the pragmatist theory is superior to the correspondence theory?

**Susan Haack:
The Pragmatic Theory of Truth**

§ Peirce's Theory of Truth

- 1. Inquiry is prompted by doubt.**
- 2. Inquiry is ended only with the acquisition of a stable belief.**
- 3. A stable belief is stable consensus generated by the Scientific Method.**
- 4. Therefore, truth is the end of inquiry.**
- 5. Therefore, truth is that which is satisfactory to believe.**

[The Scientific Method]:

___ includes three types of argument: deductive, inductive and abductive. ('Abduction' = 'studying facts and devising a theory to explain them.')

*** Alternative methods of inquiry:**

___ the method of tenacity, the method of authority, and the *a priori* method, etc.

*** Peirce's Argument for the Scientific Method:**

- ___ **1. Reality is independent of our beliefs about it.**
- ___ **2. Beliefs acquired by the use of the Scientific Method are caused by Real Things.**
- ___ **3. So the use of the Scientific Method cannot but lead, eventually, to a stable consensus.**
- ___ **4. Therefore, only one method, the Scientific Method, is stable; enables one to acquire a belief that will not be shaken.**

§ James' Theory of Truth

- 1. If what one believes is true one is guaranteed against recalcitrance on the part of experience. Experience, as we know, has ways of *boiling over*, and making us correct our present formulas.**
- 2. One could get along perfectly well, for a bit, holding false beliefs, but one could eventually be caught out.**
- 3. True beliefs... are those which are verifiable. Those beliefs are true which, in the long run, are corroborated or confirmed by experience.**
- 4. The true is satisfactory (useful, expedient, good) to believe, because it is safe from overthrow by subsequent experience.**

5. Truth is growing corpus, that is, that new truths come into existence as human knowledge grows.
6. The true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief.
7. However, sometimes alternative theoretic formulas are equally compatible with all the truths we know, and then we choose between them for subjective reasons ... we follow 'elegance' or 'economy.'
8. Pragmatism... asks its usual question. "Grant an idea or belief to be true," it says, "what concrete difference will its being true make in anyone's actual belief? How will the truth be realized? What experiences will be different from those which would obtain if the belief were false?"

§ Dewey's Theory of Truth

1. Dewey prefers to replace the word 'truth' by 'warranted assertibility.'
2. Truth is precisely what the method of inquiry warrants us in asserting.
3. We can analyze 'x knows that p' along the lines of 'x believes p, p is true and x has good reason for his belief that p.'

§ Summary of the Pragmatic Theory of Truth:

Truth →

- (i) Is the end of inquiry
- (ii) Is correspondence with reality
- (iii) Is satisfactory to believe
- (iv) Is coherence with experience – verifiability [is a growing corpus]
- (v) Entitled belief to be called 'knowledge'

Peirce: (i) – (iii)

James: (ii) – (iv)

Dewey: (i) – (v)

§ Haack's Criticism of Pragmatism

[Problem 1]:

The pragmatist theory of truth is certainly *not* subjectivist in the sense of identifying truth-for-me with whatever-I-happen-to-find-congenial-to-believe. The satisfactoriness

of true beliefs consists in their correspondence with reality. But a further question then arises: how objective, on the pragmatist view, is reality?

[fallibilism]

___ The view that some or all claims to knowledge could be mistaken. (Our knowledge is fallible.)

*** Peirce**

Reality = what the Scientific Community, as a whole and in the long run, believes.

This tension in Peirce also manifests that the truth is what the Scientific Community *will* in the long run agree on, and the thesis that the truth is what the Scientific Community *would* in the long run agree upon, if it *did* agree.

*** James**

There are those truths which, given the fallibility of our means of acquiring knowledge, may never be verified or falsified.

[Problem 2]:

If truth is the end of inquiry, then, not only must all beliefs warranted, in the long run, by the Scientific Method, be true, but also, all truths must be, in the long run, warranted by the Scientific Method. But what reason is there to think that the Scientific Method would eventually yield all truths? Is it not likely, on the contrary, that some true propositions will never even be entertained?

§ Conclusion

1. The theory is a cosmopolitan one, in that it includes substantial coherence and correspondence elements; and it thereby acquires some of the strengths of the coherence and correspondence theories while avoiding some of the weaknesses.
2. The pragmatist theory avoids that divorce of the theory of truth from epistemology – which is apt to make classical correspondence theories unsatisfying. By insisting that one ask what difference the truth or falsity of a belief would make, the pragmatists ensure that their theory of truth connects closely with their theory of knowledge.
3. Of course, the close connection between the pragmatist theory of truth and their theory of knowledge and theory of meaning mean that the former theory is vulnerable to criticisms directed at the latter.