

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

Handout (6)

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William Alston: Realism and the Tasks of Epistemology

§ Alethic Realism

[Alethic Realism]

1. The sense of ‘true’ and ‘false’ in which such items as beliefs, statements, and propositions can be evaluated as true or false.
2. It is important to determine the truth-value of such items in this sense.

Note: alethic (adj.)

___ From the Greek word for truth, ‘*aletheia*.’ (Alston)

___ **relating to the philosophical concepts of truth and possibility and especially to the branch of logic that formalizes them.** (Encarta® World English Dictionary © 1999 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved. Developed for Microsoft by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.)

§ The Realist Conception of Truth

1. The basic intuitive idea of the realist conception of truth and falsity is that what determines whether a statement is true is whether what the statement says to be the case *is* the case.
2. The truth *maker* is something that is objective vis-à-vis the truth *bearer*. It has to do with what the truth bearer is about, rather than with some “internal” or “intrinsic” feature of the truth bearer, such as its epistemic status, its place in a system of propositions, or the confidence with which it is held.
3. Truth has to do with the relation of a potential truth bearer to a *reality* beyond itself.

*** Truth-bearers**

___ Propositions are the primary truth-bearers. It is really propositions we have in mind when we speak of statements or beliefs as true.

4. *Q*: How do we formulate a definition of the realist conception of truth?
___ 4. A statement is true =_{df.} If one made that statement, what one would thereby say to be the case actually is the case.

___ 8. A proposition is true =_{df.} If one were to make a statement with that proposition as content, what one would thereby say to be the case actually is the case.

___ 10. The proposition that p is true *iff* p.

___ **12. Any instance of (10) is necessarily, analytically true by virtue of the meaning of, inter alia (*among other things*), ‘true.’**

(It seems clear that they are all equivalent. But I will be thinking mostly in terms of (12) when I speak of the realist conception of truth.)

§ The Other View: Epistemic Conception of Truth

___ What it takes to make a statement or a belief true is some epistemic status it enjoys, either for the individual subject or for some social group.

1. Bradley: “truth is that which satisfies the intellect.”
2. Pierce: the opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by the truth.”
3. James: “true ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate, and verify.”
4. Dewey: true ideas are those that are instrumental to “an active reorganization of the given environment, a removal of some specific trouble or perplexity.”
5. Putnam: “truth is an *idealization* of rational acceptability – some sort of ideal coherence of our beliefs with each other and with our experiences *as those experiences are themselves represented in our belief system* – and not correspondence with mind-independent or discourse-independent ‘state of affairs’.”

§ The Task of Epistemology

It is generally agreed that the consideration of the nature and conditions of knowledge and justified (rational) belief is at the heart of epistemology.

Justification \leftrightarrow Truth

On the one hand it is generally agreed that it is conceptually possible for one to be justified (rational) in believing false propositions. On the other hand, it is generally agreed that justification has some intimate relation with truth. *Q*: What kind of relation?

1. truth-conducive theory: (externalist theories, esp. reliabilism)

___ It is a fundamental constraint on conditions of justification that the satisfaction of those conditions guarantee that it is at least highly probable that the belief in question is true.

2. internalist theory:

___ Being justified in believing that p is a matter of how things seem from the subject’s own perspective – whether that perspective is usually identified with what one can

ascertain just on reflection – rather than a matter of the objective likelihood of the belief's being true.

___ There is no *logical* connection between epistemic justification and truth.

(i) A deontological conception of justification:

___ Being justified in believing that p is a matter of whether the subject is satisfying intellectual obligations in believing that p.

(ii) An Evidentialist conception of justification:

___ A belief is justified if the subject has sufficient (adequate) reasons, grounds, or evidence for the belief, where the criterion of adequacy is not in terms of the objective likelihood of the truth of the belief but rather in terms of whether the subject believes, would believe on reflection, or is justified in believing that the evidence renders the belief likely to be true.

* Alston: Even in the internalist accounts of justification, truth plays an essential role in the understanding of justification, though a different role from the one it plays in truth-conducive conceptions. Thus, on all the accounts of justification, we cannot raise and answer questions of whether various beliefs are justified without employing, or presupposing, the notion of truth.

[Supplement]

**Laurence Bonjour:
Internalism and Externalism**

Q: Must epistemic justification be within the cognitive grasp of the believer? Must the believer know or have possession of the justification for his or her belief?

Internalism	Externalism
1. Epistemic justification <u>must be</u> <i>internal</i> to the believer: for the belief in question to be justified, he or she must be able to cite the justification for that belief.	1. Epistemic justification <u>need not be</u> internal to the believer: a belief might be justified for a particular believer simply because the causal process that led to its adoption is cognitively reliable, even if both the nature of the process and its reliability are entirely unknown and cognitively inaccessible to the believer in question. → Reliabilism
2. Epistemological issues arise and must be dealt with from within the individual person's <i>first-person</i> cognitive perspective, appealing only to things that are <i>accessible to</i> that individual from that standpoint.	2. Epistemological issues can be dealt with from a <i>third-person</i> point of view, to see if the causal process for the production of a certain type of beliefs leads to a high proportion of true beliefs, with the <i>degree</i> of justification depending on the degree of reliability.
3. The justification of a belief is determined <i>case by case</i> .	3. A belief is justified if the <i>general</i> sort of cognitive process from which it results is reliable in the way indicated.
4. Main reason: Something to which I have no access cannot give me a reason for thinking that one of my beliefs is true.	4. Main reason: Under internalism, most unsophisticated <i>epistemic subjects</i> (higher animals, young children, and even relatively unsophisticated adults) would have no justified beliefs, but they clearly are justified in many of their beliefs.

§ Can We Have Knowledge without the Conception of Truth?

Alston: No. [His Reasons]:

1. 'Know' is the preeminent "success term" in epistemology; and the most basic kind of success it involves consists in truth.
2. In epistemology we want to develop a general account of knowledge and justification, rather than dealing with each candidate separately. And for that we need the concept of truth.

§ Can We Have Justification without the Conception of Truth?

Alston: No. [His Reasons]:

1. Without truth, there is the question of how to distinguish *epistemic* justification of belief from other sorts, such as moral and prudential justification.
2. How will we make a rational, principled choice between competing claims to justificatory efficacy if we abandon all reference to truth, likelihood of truth, probability of truth, reliable indication of truth, and the like?
3. If it were not for our concern for truth, why should we be interested in the issue of justification at all?

§ Epistemic Accounts of Truth and Epistemology

Our brief survey of epistemic accounts of truth revealed that the more careful of them identify truth not with the kind of justification, coherence, or rational acceptability for which we ordinarily settle in the press of affairs, but rather, as Putnam says, with rational acceptability under "epistemically ideal conditions."

On the realist conception, our ability to determine the truth value of a proposition is highly sensitive to content. This is because of the T-schema that declares 'it is true that p' to be equivalent to 'p.' This guarantees that if and only if we can tell whether or not p, we can tell whether or not it is true that p.

§ The "Ideal Epistemic Condition"

There is no unique set of relevant considerations for a given statement. And how are those assumptions to be chosen for "ideal epistemic conditions"? They would have to be the assumptions that we are most justified in accepting. But most justified relative to what further background assumptions? And infinite regress looms. What can we do to rescue the notion of an ideal epistemic situation from this fatal relativity to background assumptions?

We can take observational, memory, and introspective beliefs, as well as the intuitively self-evident, to have an initial credibility apart from high-level background assumptions, though defeasible, in principle, by various considerations. This will give us a base of *prima facie* justified beliefs as an anchor for whatever larger system is constructed. We

can then envisage the larger system as the one whose members best cohere with each other and with the base just specified, or with as much of the base as survives defeaters.

What has happened is that in order to develop an epistemic conception that is not desperately implausible as an account of *truth*, we are forced to introduce a conception of epistemically ideal circumstance that is so far removed from our actual epistemic situation as to make it somewhere between very difficult and impossible for us to make informed judgments as to what would or would not be justifiable in such circumstances.

§ Conclusion

- 1. Epistemology makes heavy use of a realist conception of truth.**
- 2. If the epistemologist were either to eschew any consideration of truth or to switch to an epistemic construal of truth, his attempts to make progress on epistemological issues would be greatly worsened.**
- 3. Therefore, alternatives to alethic realism have nothing to recommend them in the field of epistemology.**