

## WHAT IS TRUTH?

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[Extract from an unfinished elementary textbook, *Reasoning: the 4th "R"*]

According to the *New Testament*, when Pontius Pilate asked the question, not even the Son of God volunteered an answer.

Yet Aristotle had given a pretty good one about three centuries earlier. In his *Metaphysics* he had written:

"it is true to say of that which is, that it is, or of that which is not, that it is not."<sup>1</sup>

Availing ourselves of the previously introduced notion of a statement-variable, we can express Aristotle's point even more simply. We can say that, where the letter "P" stands for any statement whatever, the concept of truth is captured by the following schematic statement (we'll call it "Equivalence Schema" or "E" for short) of the necessary and sufficient conditions for a statement's being true:

E: It is true that P iff P.<sup>2</sup>

Obviously, countless statements satisfy (are instances of) this Equivalence Schema. Thus we can say:

- (3) It is true that snow is white iff snow is white.
- (4) It is true that there are intelligent beings elsewhere in our galaxy iff there are intelligent beings elsewhere in our galaxy.
- (5) It is true that every even number is the sum of two primes iff every even number is the sum of two primes.
- (6) It is true that God exists iff God exists.
- . . . and so on, and so on.

It matters not what statement we regard the variable "P" as standing for - be it a statement of logic and mathematics, a statement of science, an ordinary statement of observation, a statement about our "inner" states, a statement about

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<sup>1</sup> This is a fairly strict translation of the original Greek. A rather more perspicuous rendering would be: "it is true to say of that which is the case that it is the case, or of that which is not the case that it is not the case."

<sup>2</sup> Those who are familiar with Tarski's so-called "T schema" should note that our E schema is different from his. Tarski's T schema yields, as instances, such claims as "Snow is white" is true iff snow is white where the sentence that occurs on the right is referred to by its quotation-mark name on the left. No such quotation marks occur in E since E has to do with statements (or propositions, as we will come to call them later), not with sentences. More on this later.

God, or what-not - that statement will be true iff things are as that statement says they are, and false otherwise.<sup>3</sup>

This account of truth has been around ever since Aristotle, but it has recently been given a new name. Paul Horwich has called it<sup>4</sup>

### **THE MINIMALIST THEORY OF TRUTH.**

The title is obviously appropriate. It is a minimalist theory because it doesn't tell us anything that most of us didn't already know, or wouldn't have known had we thought about it. Hence it is likely to disappoint those who have higher expectations of a theory of truth. The trouble with the highly abstract question, "What is truth?", is that it sounds so deep and puzzling. We are led to expect a profound answer - an answer whose esoteric nature, perhaps, will give us the feeling that now we know one of the deep mysteries of life. And it is likely to disappoint in another way as well. We may feel that simply being told under what conditions a statement is true doesn't go far enough, since it doesn't tell us how to *find out* whether any given statement satisfies those conditions.

These feelings of discontent are understandable. But they arise from questionable assumptions.

Why should we assume that an understanding of the conditions in which statements are true can be achieved only by difficult and arduous enquiry? If the minimalist theory is right, the concept of truth is that of a simple property ascribable to statements whenever the conditions specified in schema E are satisfied. There's no more to it than that. It isn't a complex concept, such as the concept of knowledge. For rather more than two thousand years, philosophers have put a lot of time and effort into debating the question as to whether the concept of knowledge is properly to be analyzed as justified true belief, i.e., as having three simpler concepts (those of truth, belief, and justification) as its constituents. But on the minimalist account, no such analysis is called for, or possible.

Again, why should we assume that an adequate theory of truth should tell us how truths are to be discovered? Surely there's a difference between a statement's being true and our having some way of finding out that it is true. Surely, too, we need to know what it is for a statement to be true before we

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<sup>3</sup> So far as falsity is concerned, Aristotle defined it thus: "it is false to say of that which is the case, that it is not the case, or of that which is not the case, that it is the case." In effect, he was subscribing to the schema: It is false that P iff it is not the case that P.

<sup>4</sup> This is the title adopted by Paul Horwich in his book, *Truth* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990). The theory itself certainly doesn't originate with him, though he has given it the most subtle and penetrating defence. John Mackie and William Kneale have called it the Simple Theory.

embark on the project of trying to find out which statements have that property (just as we need to know what it is for a quark to have the property of charm before looking for charmed quarks). There's a difference, in short, between truth and verification, between what is true and what is known to be true.

Even if the minimalist theory doesn't meet all the demands that some have placed upon it, it does satisfy four main desiderata that would commend it to others.

First, the minimalist theory explains why it is that in asserting, believing, or thinking that P, we are ipso facto asserting, believing, or thinking that P is true. For example, since snow is white iff it is true that snow is white, there is no way in which we can assert that snow is white without asserting it to be true that snow is white. Little wonder, as I said before, that the concept of truth is indispensable in all our thinking and reasoning.<sup>5</sup>

Second, the minimalist theory enables us to give a unitary account of truth in all fields of enquiry. We don't need to postulate different senses of "truth", ordinary truth, logical truth, scientific truth, religious truth, and so on. The truth-predicate, as it has been called, isn't ambiguous, as some have thought. Nor is any special insight called for in order to understand the nature of truth in these different domains. To be sure, the truths of religion differ from the truths of science, and these again from those of logic. But they differ with respect to what they are about, and perhaps also with respect to the ways in which their truths are discovered, not with respect to the nature of truth itself. The statements "God exists" and "God doesn't exist" are alike in respect of their subject-matter. Both are religious statements whose truth or falsity is debated by those interested in such matters. Similarly, the statements "There are intelligent beings elsewhere in our galaxy" and "There are no intelligent beings elsewhere in our galaxy" are alike in respect of their subject-matter. Both are scientific statements whose truth or falsity is currently being investigated by the NASA's SETI (Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence) program. Clearly, both our religious statements differ in subject-matter from both the scientific ones. But there is no good reason to say that the truth of a religious statement is a different kind of truth from that of a scientific one. A statement of either kind will be true just if it states how things are, and false otherwise. Again, the truths of logic differ from the truths of both religion and science, but they differ in respect of what they are about, not with respect to the way in which they are true.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For this reason, as well as some others, the Minimalist Theory ought not to be confused with Ramsey's so-called Redundancy Theory, despite similarities. For more on the distinction see Horwich, pp.38-40.

<sup>6</sup> A contrary view has it that the truths of logic and mathematics are made "verbal truths" or made true "by definition". For a sustained critique of this account, see Bradley and Swartz, *Possible Worlds: an Introduction to Logic and its Philosophy*, pp. 58-62.

Third, the minimalist theory is a REALIST or OBJECTIVE theory in the sense that the truth or falsity of a given statement isn't in any way mind-dependent but depends upon what the world, of which we are a part, is like. Thinking or believing that something is so does not, in general, make it so.<sup>7</sup> What makes the statement that God exists true or false is the existence, or non-existence, of God, as the case may be. But the existence, or non-existence, of God isn't something that is up to us. What makes it true or false that snow is white is the whiteness, or non-whiteness, of snow. And the whiteness, or non-whiteness, of snow isn't dependent upon our thinking it to be so. What makes it true or false that Canada is north of Mexico is Canada's standing, or not standing, in that relation to Mexico. Our thinking or not thinking Canada to be north of Mexico can't change their respective geographical locations. What makes it true that 3 is the successor of 2 is 3's being the successor of 2. And so on. So long, therefore, as things exist or have properties or stand in relations to one another, the statements which assert that they exist or have those properties or stand in those relations, will be true - whether or not we think that they do. On the minimalist theory, then, the truth-makers of statements are to be found in the way the world is, not in our choosing to think it thus or so.

Fourth, the minimalist theory of truth is a NON-EPISTEMIC one: it doesn't say anything about epistemic matters (matters to do with knowledge) - matters to do with how we can tell, find out, or know whether a given proposition is true. It enables us to distinguish between being true and being verified. It merely offers us an account of what it *means* to say that a proposition or belief is true. It would be a mistake, therefore, to object to it on the grounds that many of the beliefs we previously thought to be true turned out not to be, or that many of those we now hold to be true may yet turn out to be false. The point is that, even if we are uncertain of the truth of many of our beliefs, we still must understand *what it would be like* for a belief to be true. If we didn't understand the meaning of "true" and "truth" then what would we be uncertain about?

### **IS THE MINIMALIST THEORY A KIND OF CORRESPONDENCE THEORY?**

Introductory texts in Philosophy often distinguish between three sorts of theories of truth, roughly distinguished as follows. CORRESPONDENCE theories hold that truth of a statement consists in something like its correspondence with facts. PRAGMATIST theories hold that the truth of a belief consists in something like its utility. COHERENCE theories hold roughly that the truth of a belief consists in its relationships with other beliefs in a consistent and comprehensive system.

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<sup>7</sup> I say "does not, in general," because there are exceptions. Thinking that it is true that I am thinking does indeed make it true that I am thinking. And likewise for believing.

There is a fairly clear sense in which the minimalist theory qualifies as a version of the correspondence theory. For a start, both its Equivalence Schema, E, and each of the countless instances of that schema have the form of two-way conditionals (bi-conditionals) asserting a one-one correspondence between the truth of some statement P and the fact that P asserts. It holds, for instance, that there is a one-one correspondence between its being true that snow is white and snow's being white, and again between its being true that 3 is the successor of 2 and 3's being the successor of 2. Moreover, it is natural enough to say that states of affairs such as snow's being white or 3's being the successor of 2 are FACTS and that it is these facts that make the corresponding statements true. For my own part, I see nothing mysterious or misleading about this way of speaking, and so am happy enough to describe the minimalist theory as a kind of correspondence theory - albeit a minimal one!

Nevertheless, most proponents of correspondence theories have wanted to say a lot more than this.

### **MORE ROBUST CORRESPONDENCE THEORIES.**

One very influential view in the early part of this century was that of the great Austrian philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951). At one point, in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), he explained the concept of truth in a minimalist, Aristotelian, kind of way. He said that a statement is true "if we use it to say that things stand in a certain way, and they do." (4.062). In like vein he said that a statement is true or false according to whether it "agrees with reality or fails to agree with it." (2.21).

But elsewhere in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein went further, claiming not only that there is a one-one correspondence true statements and facts but also between the constituents of true statements and the constituents of facts. He spoke of true statements "picturing" the world, and thought that they do this in a detailed way, both the statements and the facts pictured having equal numbers of "constituents".

Critics have found a lot to complain about in this more robust, deeper - level, correspondence theory. Suppose it to be true, of some particular cat and some particular mat, that the cat is on the mat. There is, they would say, some plausibility to the idea that the statement

(7) The cat is on the mat

has constituents, the cat, the mat, (some might even want to include the relation of *being on*)<sup>8</sup>, which (when the statement is true) somehow stand in a one-one

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<sup>8</sup> Most felt, however, that there were difficulties about counting relations as genuine parts, especially since a relation such as that of being on has to hook up with its relata in some specifiable way, there being a difference between the cat being on the mat and the mat being on the cat. Are we then to include the specific manner of hook-up as

relationship to the constituents of the situation it depicts. But - they would point out - if the theory is to be fully general it must apply not only to simple cases like (7), but to other true statements as well. Consider, for example, the true statement

(8) All mules are sterile.

What are its constituents supposed to be? Surely, if something has constituents, it has a determinate number of constituents? Wittgenstein certainly thought so.<sup>9</sup> But what is the number of the constituents in this statement? And how about the number of constituents in the fact that is supposed, on the theory, to make (8) true? There is no evident sense to be given to talking about the number of constituents in either case, let alone to the claim that statement (8) and the corresponding fact have the same number of constituents.

And there were other problems, too, quite apart from ones having to do with the nature of the so-called "correspondence" relation. How about the so-called RELATA (the things supposed to be related by the correspondence relation)? On the one hand, we have a statement which is supposed to be true, e.g., the statement

(9) Snow is white.

And on the other hand, we have the fact of snow's being white - the fact that is supposed to make (9) true. Yet, on further reflection, it is easy to raise questions about the precise nature of both these relata. We'll discuss exactly what is to be meant by "statements" in section 2 of this chapter, and will come to the conclusion that they are best thought of as what philosophers call PROPOSITIONS. But for the moment, let's consider the other proposed relatum, FACTS.

What exactly, it might be asked, is to count as a fact? A commonly voiced objection to any correspondence theory, minimal or robust, is that facts are nothing other than true statements. Consider the expression "It is a fact that . . .", as it occurs in a claim such as "It is a fact that snow is white". Surely, it would be said, the expression "It is a fact that . . ." simply functions as another way of saying "It is a true statement that . . .". But if so, then the claim that a statement is true just when it corresponds with the facts collapses into the uninformative TAUTOLOGY, "A statement is true just when it corresponds with a true statement."

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still another ingredient? The question seems imponderable, and might well lead one to wonder whether the whole approach isn't somehow misguided.

<sup>9</sup> Wittgenstein spoke of statement and fact as having "the same mathematical multiplicity". He also thought that if we were to give a full analysis of a statement like (8), we would eventually reach a set of simple statements whose constituents could be counted just as easily(?) as those of (7). But most later philosophers came to think that this talk of the ultimate residue of analysis was little more than a smoke-screen for the difficulties in Wittgenstein's picture-theory as it applied to true statements.

Some have thought this a knock-down objection to any kind of correspondence theory. But how serious is it? Not very, I suggest. For although the term "fact", in some uses, is indeed synonymous with "true statement", there are other equally common and legitimate uses in which "fact" means something like "EXISTING STATE OF AFFAIRS". Thus we can say that space-travel is now a fact, that snow's being white is a fact, and that  $1+1$ 's being equal to 2 is a fact. This was the sense in which Wittgenstein - and Bertrand Russell, his philosophical collaborator at that time - used the term.<sup>10</sup> And it is in this sense that we can, with perfect propriety, speak of facts as being TRUTH-MAKERS or TRUTH-GROUNDS<sup>11</sup> for true statements, i.e., as what makes true statements true.

The upshot of our discussion of correspondence theories, then, is this. There seem not to be any good reasons for refusing to say that a true proposition is one which corresponds with the facts, provided (a) that the term "facts" is understood in the sense just explained, and (b) that the term "corresponds" is understood in the minimal sense rather than the robust one. In short, a minimalist correspondence theory seems not only to withstand the criticisms that have been levelled against it, but also to accord perfectly with our ordinary understanding of what "true" and "truth" mean. It is this minimalist correspondence sense of "true" and "false", I would argue, that is indispensable in all our thought and belief.

Why, then, does the minimalist theory have rivals? Sometimes, I think, because critics of correspondence haven't thought carefully enough about how their criticisms might be answered. Sometimes because - as suggested earlier - they've thought that a theory of truth shouldn't just tell us what truth is but should also give us some criteria for ascertaining which statements are true and which are not. And sometimes, as we'll see, because the sponsors of rival theories have their own philosophical agendas to pursue. For those in this third category, the concept of truth is often among the last they consider, and the account they give of it is driven by other doctrines which they have already settled on.

## THE COHERENCE THEORY OF TRUTH

One of the primary motivations for adopting a coherence theory of truth is to be found in the work of the great German philosopher, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). In his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), Kant came to the conclusion that

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<sup>10</sup> In the first few pages of his *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein claimed that the world is made up of the totality of facts (1.1) or the totality of existing states of affairs (2.05). Note that he doesn't restrict the term to contingent states of affairs, for he talks also of the facts of logic (2.0121). Bertrand Russell, too, operated with this general sense of "fact". Thus he was able to claim: "When I speak of a fact . . . I mean the sort of thing that makes a proposition true or false." (*The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, 1918).

<sup>11</sup> The term "truth-grounds" was Wittgenstein's. These days, philosophers usually talk of "truth-makers" instead.

we can have no knowledge of reality in itself, the world of *noumena* or of things-in-themselves, all our knowledge being restricted to *phenomena*, to things as they appear to us. On his account, the notion of truth as correspondence with reality is an unattainable ideal, something beyond our grasp. Hence the best we can aspire to is a notion of truth that is to be located within the realm of our beliefs.

The Coherence Theory became particularly fashionable in the nineteenth century, when the so-called Idealists held sway, first in Europe, then in England. One of the most influential was the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831) who maintained that nothing exists outside the "ideas" we have in our minds.<sup>12</sup>

Hegel's idealism, like Kant's, generated a problem: How, on such a view of the nature of Reality, can one explain the difference between truth and falsity? If all that exists (or, in Kant's case, all we can know to exist) is mental, then there can't be an "external" reality to play the role of truth-maker for some of our ideas and of falsity-maker for others. But this means that a criterion for distinguishing between what is true and what is false must be found somewhere within the domain of ideas itself.

Hegel's answer was that truth is to be found in the notion of system. "The true," he said, "is the whole." Nothing exists all by itself. Rather, everything owes its existence to everything else. Reality is therefore an interconnected whole, no part of which can be fully understood apart from its place in the whole. Our ideas are true only to the extent that they are part of, and hence cohere with, a comprehensive system of ideas. They don't then "correspond" with reality. That system *is* reality.

Make of this what you will. The fact is that Hegel's English admirers, the likes of the influential Oxford philosopher F. H. Bradley (1846-1924), made it seem intelligible enough for others to be persuaded. And so it came about that many others as well came to echo Hegel by saying such things as "truth is system." In his *Appearance and Reality* (1893), Bradley put it like this:

truth is an ideal expression of the Universe, at once coherent and comprehensive. It must not conflict with itself and there must be no suggestion which fails to fall inside it. Perfect truth, in short, must realize the idea of a systematic whole.<sup>13</sup>

It follows, according to Bradley (F. H., that is), that ordinary truths such as "Snow is white", "The earth isn't flat", "Mind isn't the only thing that has ever existed",

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<sup>12</sup> By a philosophical idealist, it should be noted, we do not mean a philosopher who cherishes certain ideals. Rather, we mean one who believes that everything consists of ideas. The term "idea-ist" might better capture the essence of the Idealist position.

<sup>13</sup> F. H. Bradley, *Essay on Truth and Reality*, (Oxford: 1914, p. 223).



and so on, are only *partly* true. But if they are only partly true, then - as he acknowledged - they are also partly *false*.

It isn't entirely clear just what this talk of degrees of truth amounts to, though someone who is brought up in this way of thinking (as I was in my early philosophical education) can easily become inured to such problems. It isn't entirely clear whether or not Bradley intends us to take his own claims about the partial truth and partial falsity of all statements seriously; for if he does then these claims themselves must be only partly true and partly false, as also must be the claims that these claims are only partly true and partly false, and so on! Nor is it clear why we should ever aspire to know the complete truth about anything. For Bradley held that complete truth is beyond our grasp, on the grounds that in order to attain it we should have to cease to exist, becoming as it were "absorbed" into reality itself!<sup>14</sup>

Hegel and Bradley were driven to the coherence theory because of their convictions that Reality is an organic whole, and that Truth - since it "aims" at Reality - must also be an organic whole. These were mainly metaphysical motivations.

The motivations for adopting a coherence theory of truth can come from epistemological sources as well. There has been an interesting current of thought, arising out of the work of members of the Vienna Circle in the 1920s, which has led to coherentism in epistemology. Members of the Vienna Circle were initially attracted to Wittgenstein's correspondence theory, but eventually came to think that all talk of reality and facts, as what make true statements true, was unduly "metaphysical". Subsequently, some of their philosophical descendants came to think that even our most seemingly straightforward observations of the "external" world are colored by antecedently held beliefs and theories in such a way that no direct checking of the truth or falsity of statements against facts is possible. Observation-statements, it is commonly said, are "theory-laden". The best we can aspire to - according to some recent proponents of this point of view - is to ensure that all our beliefs, including those that seem best attested by observation and experiment, hang together in a consistent system.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Here Bradley's views, like many other idealist views, bear more than a passing resemblance to certain Buddhist doctrines, e.g., that of Nirvana.

<sup>15</sup> Otto Neurath (1882-1945), used the analogy of sailors rebuilding their ship while still afloat on an open sea to vividly express his idea that science has to make constant revisions of its picture of reality without ever being able to set itself firmly on the shore of unshakable facts. Quine gives a similar account in his famous paper "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" (1950) when he speaks of our conceptual system as one which "faces the tribunal of experience" as a whole, not on statement-by-statement basis. Thomas Kuhn (1922- ), too, has adopted a holistic approach to questions of truth and falsity in science in his extremely influential book *The Structure of scientific Revolutions* (1992).

Whatever the sources of coherentism, some troublesome questions arise about the theory itself.

First, let's ask: What is meant by "coherence"? Early exponents of coherentism wanted to say that a set of statements or beliefs are to be considered coherent just when the members of that set are consistent with one another in the sense that it is logically possible for them all to be true.

But, as an explanation, this won't do. For, if truth is to be explained in terms of coherence, coherence in terms of consistency, and consistency in terms of possibility of joint truth, we have the very term that is being defined, viz., "truth", appearing in its own definition. Not only is that circular. The notion of truth that is ultimately appealed to seems to be precisely the minimalist correspondence notion that the coherentist wants to avoid, or at least improve upon.

A second question arises. Is coherence supposed to be just a necessary condition of truth or a sufficient condition as well?

We can certainly agree that statements in a system of beliefs must be consistent if they are to be true. For if they were inconsistent, then at least one of them would have to be false. So coherence, in the sense of consistency, is obviously a necessary condition of truth. But is it also a sufficient condition? Surely not. An accomplished liar might well tell a story that hangs together and yet each of his statements be false so far as the facts are concerned.

F. H. Bradley saw the force of this objection.<sup>16</sup> His response? His critics, he complained, were overlooking the fact that coherentists demanded not just consistency among our beliefs, but comprehensiveness as well. But what does comprehensiveness amount to? Embracing *all* of Reality? Squaring with *all* the facts? Obviously, this answer won't do, since it takes recourse, once more, to the renounced notion of truth-as-correspondence. Yet a more satisfactory answer - one to be found within the circle of beliefs itself - has proved elusive. Moreover, as Bertrand Russell pointed out, an elaborate fairy-tale or piece of fiction might well satisfy the joint requirements of being consistent and comprehensive without being true. So, for that matter, might the all-embracing but distorted world-view of a paranoid schizophrenic.

Russell's objection to coherentism as a theory of the NATURE of truth (of what it is for something to be true) seems decisive. But mightn't coherence be regarded, more sensibly, as a CRITERION or TEST of truth? That is to say, can't it be thought of as providing a distinguishing mark of truth, and hence a way of ascertaining which of our beliefs are true and which false?

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<sup>16</sup> This was in 1914, with the publication of his *Essays on Truth and Reality*.

Even a criterial account of coherence generates problems. Certainly, we can't hold a belief to be true if it conflicts with, is inconsistent with, other beliefs if we already know these other beliefs to be true. But what is the test of *their* truth? For the reasons that Russell gave, it can't be simply that they are consistent with one another. In any case, as Australian philosopher John Mackie has pointed out, any given person's beliefs are likely to include some that he or she holds simply because the facts seem to be as he or she believes them to be, not because these beliefs fit in with others that the person held antecedently.<sup>17</sup>

## THE PRAGMATIST THEORY OF TRUTH

This third theory came into prominence rather later than the Coherence Theory, though it too had been foreshadowed by some thinkers many centuries earlier.

Pragmatism, in its modern guise, began in America with the work of lighthouse-keeper, physicist and philosopher C. S. Peirce (1839-1914) and has thrived there ever since. Among its most notable exponents were Harvard psychologist and philosopher William James (1842-1910) and the influential educationist John Dewey (1859-1952). And the pragmatist conception of truth is central to the recent thinking of two well-known contemporary American philosophers, Hilary Putnam and Richard Rorty (led to it mainly by epistemological concerns), as well as that of the English philosopher, Michael Dummett (led to it mainly by concerns to do with the theory of meaning).

Needless to say, we can find many marked differences, as well as nuances, of doctrine among those who embrace broadly pragmatist conceptions of truth. Here are some typical formulations.

Peirce:

"The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate is what we mean by the truth."<sup>18</sup>

"Truth is that concordance of an abstract statement with the ideal limit towards which endless investigation would tend to bring scientific belief."<sup>19</sup>

James:

"True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify."<sup>20</sup>

"An idea is true *so long as* to believe it is profitable in our lives."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> John L. Mackie, *Truth, Probability and Paradox* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p. 25.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted by Dewey, *Logic: the Theory of Inquiry*, p. 345n.

<sup>19</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>20</sup> William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for some Old ways of Thinking* (Longmans, Green and Co., 1907), p. 201.

<sup>21</sup> Op. cit., p. 75.

"The true is only the expedient in the way of our thinking. Expedient in the long run, and on the whole, of course."<sup>22</sup>

"Our account of truth is an account of truths in the plural . . . having only this quality in common, that they *pay*."<sup>23</sup>

Dewey:

"Knowledge in its strictest and most honorific sense is identical with warranted assertion."<sup>24</sup>

Rorty:

Truth is "what our peers will let us get away with saying."<sup>25</sup>

Not only are these accounts different from one another. Each of them invites obvious counter-examples.

Consider Peirce's account, for a start. As Russell pointed out, if we say that a statement is true just when it is "fated to be ultimately agreed to", we can't attribute truth to a statement without thereby making a sociological prophecy.<sup>26</sup> But there would seem to be many mundane truths, e.g., that I had coffee with my breakfast on 16th May, 1994, which are surely unlikely to come to the attention of, let alone secure the agreement of, inquirers in the last days. Moreover, Peirce's account leaves us in the dark about what the investigators are doing. Peirce can't say that they are investigating the truth, in the ordinary correspondence sense of the word, for that would be to operate with a non-pragmatic notion of truth. All he can consistently say is that they are investigating "truth" in his defined sense of that word. But that means that they are investigating the opinion that they ultimately have agreed upon! Why that opinion should need investigating, or what its investigation might comprise, is left unclear.

James's account fares no better. As G. E. Moore pointed out, historians frequently concern themselves with ideas some of which no doubt are true.<sup>27</sup> But is it without doubt that all their true ideas are ones which they, we, or anyone else (even an ideal community of inquirers) can "validate, corroborate, and verify"? If so, then we must take seriously the idea that in the long run, if not before, there'll be no truths left unknown and that we on earth (like God in heaven is supposed already to be) will one day be omniscient.

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<sup>22</sup> Op. cit., p. 222.

<sup>23</sup> Op. cit., p. 218.

<sup>24</sup> John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (New York, 1938), p. 143.

<sup>25</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, quoted by Alvin Plantinga in "How to be an Anti-Realist", Presidential Address to APA, 1982, p. 50.

<sup>26</sup> Bertrand Russell, "Dewey's New Logic", in *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, ed., Paul Schilpp, (New York: Tudor Publishing Co., 1939).

<sup>27</sup> G. E. Moore, "Professor James' 'Pragmatism'", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1907-8.

Identifying truth with verification involves a CONFLATION (running together) of two distinct concepts. To verify something is to show it to be true. So the concept of verification is a compound one, involving an epistemic concept - that of showing or knowing - along with the concept of truth. Clearly, the compound concept can't be identical to its simpler constituent.

Nor can we identify truth with profitability, expedience, and what pays. It may be the case that some true beliefs are expedient, but surely not all are. I may truly believe that I have an itchy back, but it would clearly be more expedient for me to forget it than to think about it. Again, it may be the case that some expedient beliefs are true; but surely not all are. It may be expedient for a politician to tell a lie; but the fact that his lie "pays" doesn't make his lie true.

How about Dewey's claim that truth amounts to warranted assertibility? Problems abound. Whose standards of verifiability or warranted assertibility are we to take seriously? Those of an illiterate peasant in the Dark Ages? Those of Geraldo or some other tabloid TV personality? Clearly what counts as a warranted assertion varies from person to person as well as from time to time. Do we want to say that truth itself varies accordingly? If so, then how about the truth of the pragmatic theory itself? Shall we say that it varies from true to false? In all probability Dewey would, at this point, want to make truth a function of warranted assertibility within an ideal scientific community, or something like that. But we've already noted Russell's objections to that.

Finally, consider Rorty's formulation. It leads straightforwardly to two rather disconcerting conclusions: relativism and anti-realism. Worse still, as we'll see, it is self-refuting.

It is relativistic in so far as, if truth is determined by the consensus of one's peers, then there will be as many truths as there are consensuses among peers. Evolutionary theorists will let one get away with saying that dinosaurs once roamed the face of the earth. So, for them, it is true that they did. Many fundamentalist Christians won't let one get away with saying this, believing that dinosaurs never lived and that their fossils were put into the earth by God at the time of creation (about 6006 BC according to Bishop Usher's calculations). So, for them, it is false that dinosaurs once lived. Hence, the statement that dinosaurs lived, is both true and false! Of course, if that sounds like an unwarranted violation of the Law of Noncontradiction to you, you can always retreat into claiming that it is true for evolutionists but false for fundamentalists. You can embrace the kind of rampant relativism whose perils we'll explore in the First Interlude below.

Rorty's claim is anti-realist in so far as it makes reality itself, not just our beliefs about it, a creation of human beings. For suppose you are a fundamentalist, and believe that dinosaurs never lived at all. Then, since your

fundamentalist peers will let you get away with this, it will be true that dinosaurs never lived. But if it is true that dinosaurs never lived, then there never would have been any dinosaurs. So the existence or nonexistence of dinosaurs is up to you and your peers. More generally, since the same argument can be run through again for anything you like to think of, the world itself must be one of your creations. So, for that matter, must God. I'm not sure that fundamentalists would be happy with such a reversal of creative roles!

This last remark brings up another, even more fundamental, objection. Once we think through the consequences of Rorty's claim that truth is what our peers will let us get away with, most of us - his peers - will not let him get away with saying any such thing. Hence, if his claim is true, then - by its own say-so - it is false. So if it is true, then it isn't true. His claim, in short, is SELF-REFUTING.<sup>28</sup>

Quite apart from the particular difficulties generated by these various formulations of the pragmatist conception of truth, there is a more general objection to the whole enterprise. For it is clear that all these formulations are supposed to tell us, in Peirce's words, "what we mean by the truth." The pragmatists aren't just telling us about some of the interesting links between the concept of truth and other concepts. Nor are they to be understood as making linguistic recommendations, suggestions as to terms that we should use instead of the term "true". They are offering an analysis of what we ordinarily mean when we talk of truth. They are rejecting the notion of truth as correspondence with fact, and offering a rival account of the conditions under which a belief or statement is true. Yet it is easy to see that their own account is parasitic upon the minimalist correspondence account.

Suppose we want to know, of some particular belief, e.g., the belief that Ray Bradley crashed his seaplane in 1983, whether that belief is true or false. Then, the pragmatist will enjoin us not to look at the facts pertaining to events in 1983, but to ask such questions as: "Is this fated to be ultimately agreed upon by an ideal community of scientific investigators?"; "Is this something *we* can verify?"; "Is it expedient or profitable for *us* to believe this?"; and "Are *we* warranted in asserting this?" Not only do these questions seem irrelevant. The trouble is that in order to answer these questions about the utility of holding such a belief, we would have to find out whether or not it is a FACT that it is useful to have this belief. That is, we would have to find out whether it is TRUE in the minimalist correspondence sense, that this belief will ultimately be agreed to, that it is verified, that having this belief "pays", and/or that we are warranted in asserting it. In short, the pragmatist criterion for attributing truth and falsity to

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<sup>28</sup> Alvin Plantinga has presented this argument with typical vigor in the Presidential Address noted above.

beliefs presupposes an antecedent understanding of what it is for a belief to be true or false in the ordinary sense of that word.

The point is that statements of the form "It is useful to believe that P" seem themselves to be true or false not because it is useful, or not useful, to believe them, but because the world makes them one or the other. We are just plain wrong, for instance, if we think it is useful to believe that LSD will enable us to fly like a bird. The claim that this belief is useful is, itself, just plain false. Why? Just try taking LSD and then flying out of a ten-story window with the powers that LSD is supposed to give you. The non-utility of this belief is forced on us by the way the world is. It *isn't* useful to believe such a thing. Thus the truth or falsity of statements of the form "It is useful to believe that P" is best accounted for by a realist, correspondence theory of truth not by a pragmatist one.

It is not surprising, then, that Russell, Moore, and others have accused the pragmatist "theory" of truth of being obscurantist.

Why, then, have so many otherwise fairly clear-headed thinkers have come to subscribe to it?

Perhaps the most charitable explanation is to say that the pragmatist theory offers an account of the notion of rational acceptability rather than of truth itself. After all, it is obvious that in the past many beliefs were held to be true which we now have good reason to reject as false: that the earth is flat, that it is at the center of the solar system, that the universe began about 8,000 years ago, that the signs of the Zodiac are the sole determinants of our futures, that insanity is caused by demonic possession, and so on. Yet we can well allow that it was, at one time, considered RATIONAL to accept these beliefs because, as James put it, "they help[ed] us to get into satisfactory relations with other parts of our experience" - because, in a word, they "worked". The fact that a belief is useful in our transactions with the world may make it rationally acceptable. But, let's remind ourselves, it doesn't make it "true" in the realist sense of that word (a sense upon which pragmatists themselves rely when they say that certain beliefs do in fact work).

Even when construed as offering an account of rational acceptability rather than of truth the pragmatist theory is plausible for only a restricted range of cases. It is somewhat plausible as an account of why we *accept* certain high-level scientific theories as true, or at least as tentatively true: we accept them as true on the rational grounds that they work better than any of their current rivals.<sup>29</sup> Einstein's relativity theory, Niels Bohr's and Werner Heisenberg's

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<sup>29</sup> Pragmatism within this restricted theoretical domain often goes by the name of "Instrumentalism." A few instrumentalists have been careful to distinguish between the question whether a theory has instrumental value, e.g., because it yields the right predictions, and the question whether that theory is true. But most, including the Irish

quantum theory, and Stephen Hawking's theory of black holes, are all cases in point (though, of course, from a realist point of view these theories are still either true or false). But humdrum truths such as that each of us has a body, that water is a liquid, that Vancouver is a large city in British Columbia, and the like, don't fit the account anything like as well. We don't regard these as rationally acceptable or true because things work out better if we believe them. Rather we accept them as true because it is rational to accept the way the world is.

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idealist philosopher and bishop, George Berkeley (1685-1753), and Austrian philosopher and physicist, Ernst Mach (1838-1916), have insisted that theories are mere instruments for deriving some observation statements (predictions) from others (data). Instrumentalism was fervently advocated by many defenders of the early Copernicus's heliocentric view of the universe, a view which brought its supporters into conflict with Church authorities. Thus Osiander, who wrote an unsolicited introduction to Copernicus's book *De Revolutionibus*, sought to make the heliocentric theory more acceptable by declaring: "Whatever hypotheses astronomy devises (and it certainly devises *as many as possible*), it certainly does not invent them in order to persuade anyone that they are true; but merely that it might yield the correct numerical relations." Copernicus himself, as a realist, didn't accept this instrumentalist gloss. Neither did Italian mathematician, astronomer, and physicist Galilei Galileo (1564-1642), though he eventually was forced to recant his views and to spend the rest of his life under house arrest for having dared to question "Biblical truth". And neither did Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) who was burnt at the stake for his unorthodoxy.