What is Truth?

Evening Lecture
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I regard the nature of truth as the fundamental question of philosophy.

Bertrand Russell, 1908
General plan:

• Introduce how the question “What is the nature of truth?” is typically understood by philosophers

• Raise and address a general objection to asking this question in the first place

• Return to consider three different ways of addressing the question “What is the nature of truth?” that philosophers have proposed
  
  • Correspondence theory of truth (Russell)
  
  • Pragmatist theory of truth (William James, Hilary Putnam)
  
  • Deflationary theory of truth (W. V. Quine, Paul Horwich)
What is the question of “the nature of truth” and why is it regarded as so fundamental?

Some initial points:

First, what is the question of “the nature of truth”?

- When philosophers discuss “the nature of truth”, they are not trying to determine what, in fact, is true (or false)—they are not trying to identify which of our beliefs are true and which are false.

- Instead, they are trying to characterize *what it is* for a belief to be true (or to be false); they are trying to identify what it is that makes a true belief true or a false belief false.

The question “what is Truth?” is one which may be understood in several different ways, and before beginning our search for an answer, it will be well to be quite clear as to the sense in which we are asking the question. We may mean to ask what things are true: is science true? is revealed religion true? and so on. But before we can answer such questions as these, we ought to be able to say what these questions *mean*: what is it, exactly, that we are asking when we say, “is science true?” It is this preliminary question that I wish to discuss. (Russell, “On the Nature of Truth and Falsehood”, 1910)
Further, in discussing the question of “the nature of truth”, philosophers (including Russell) often emphasize that in doing so, they are not asking how it is we determine whether a given belief is true (or false)—instead, they asking what it is for a belief to be true (or false), separate from the question as how we might establish that the belief is true (if it is true).

The question we have to discuss is therefore: What is the difference between a true belief and a false belief? By this I mean, What is the difference which actually constitutes the truth or falsehood of a belief? I am not asking for what is called a criterion of truth, i.e. for some quality, other than truth, which belongs to whatever is true and to nothing else. This distinction between the nature of truth and a criterion of truth is important, and has not always been sufficiently emphasised by philosophers. A criterion is a sort of trade-mark, i.e. some comparatively obvious characteristic which is a guarantee of genuineness. "None genuine without the label": thus the label is what assures us that such and such a firm made the article. But when we say that such and such a firm made the article we do not mean that the article has the right label; thus there is a difference between meaning and criterion. Indeed, it is just this difference which makes a criterion useful. Now I do not believe that truth has, universally, any such trade-mark: I do not believe that there is any one label by which we can always know that a judgment is true rather than false. But this is not the question which I wish to discuss: I wish to discuss what truth and falsehood actually are, not what extraneous marks they have by which we can recognise them. (Russell, “On The Nature of Truth and Falsehood”)
Second, why is this question regarded as fundamental?

- One reason is that it seems connected to fundamental issues regarding our relation as thinking beings to the world (or to reality).

- As I have so far presented it, the sorts of things that are either true or false are beliefs; and the question regarding “the nature of truth” is a question as to what distinguishes a true belief from a false belief.

- Insofar as “the world” or “reality” is central to determining which of our beliefs are true and which are false, then one’s view as the nature of “the world” or “reality” will play a central role in how one addresses the question of the “nature of truth”.

- Presented in this way, the issue of “the nature of truth” does not merely concern us—or our beliefs—nor does it merely concern the nature of “the world” or “reality”; instead, it concerns the question as to how our beliefs are (or can be) related to “the world” or “reality”.

Truth, as any dictionary will tell you, is a property of certain of our ideas. It means their 'agreement,' as falsity means their disagreement, with 'reality.' Pragmatists and intellectualists both accept this definition as a matter of course. They begin to quarrel only after the question is raised as to what may precisely be meant by the term 'agreement,' and what by the term 'reality,' when reality is taken as something for our ideas to agree with. (William James, *Pragmatism*, 1907)
However, it might be thought that before addressing the question “What is the nature of truth?”, we should first be sure that there is a question to answer.

In asking the question “What is the nature of truth?”, we seem to be assuming that there is something—namely, “truth”—that has a “nature”.

But can we be sure that this is so?

Two currents of ideas are very prominent in modern thought and culture. On the one hand, there is an intense commitment to truthfulness—or, at any rate a pervasive suspiciousness, a readiness against being fooled, an eagerness to see through appearances to the real structures and motives that lay behind them. …

Together with this demand for truthfulness, however, or (to put it less positively) this reflex against deceptiveness, there is an equally pervasive suspicion about truth itself: whether there is such a thing; if there is, whether it can be more than relative or subjective or something of that kind; altogether, whether we should bother about it, in carrying out our activities or in giving an account of them. (Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*, 2002)
Williams, like many other philosophers, argues that while it may be coherent to argue that there is no “objective truth” in a certain kind of discourse (say, on matters of taste, or the interpretation of history, or aesthetics, or ethics), any such argument itself presumes that there are at least some “objective truths”.

The tension between the pursuit of truthfulness and the doubt that there is (really) any truth to be found comes out in a significant difficulty, that the attack on a specific form of truth, such as historical truth, depends on some claims or other which themselves have to be taken as true. ... Those who say that all historical accounts are ideological constructs (which is one version of the idea that there is really no historical truth) rely on some story which must itself claim historical truth. They show that supposedly “objective” historians have tendentiously told their stories from some particular perspective; they describe, for example, the biases that have gone into constructing various histories of the United States. Such an account, as a particular history, may very well be true, but truth is a virtue that is embarrassingly unhelpful to a critic who wants not just to unmask past historians of America but to tell us that at the end of the line there is no historical truth. (Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*)

A certain economic theory may be merely part of a bourgeois ideology, but if so the fact that it is a part of bourgeois ideology is not itself a part of any ideology, it just is the case. (J. L. Mackie, “The Philosophy of John Anderson”, 1962)
I shall argue that while it is certainly possible in many cases to discredit appeals to the objectivity of reason by showing that their true sources lie elsewhere—in wishes, prejudices, contingent and local habits, unexamined assumptions, social or linguistic conventions, involuntary human responses, and so on—interpretations of this “perspectival” or “parochial” kind will inevitably run out sooner or later. Whether one challenges the rational credentials of a particular judgment or of a whole realm of discourse, one has to rely at some level on judgments and methods of argument which one believes are not themselves subject to the same challenge: which exemplify, even when they err, something more fundamental, and which can be corrected only by further procedures of the same kind. (Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word*, 1997)
So, let’s now assume, that there is at least some “truth”.

Want now to consider three different views of “the nature of truth”:

1) Correspondence theory

One key assumption is that there is a way reality is in itself.

On this view, a belief is true if it corresponds to the way reality is; and it is false if it does not.

Here, there is a clear distinction between the question of what it is for a belief to be true and the question as to how, or whether, we are able to determine what is, in fact: what it is for a belief to be true is for it to correspond to reality; and whether it corresponds to reality (“it itself”) is independent of the question as to how, or whether we can establish that the belief is true.

2) Pragmatist theory; rejects the correspondence theorist’s assumption regarding reality “in itself”.

Failing to have reality “in itself” for our beliefs to correspond to, pragmatists tie truth more closely to our practices of determining truth than do correspondence theorist: what it is for a belief to be true is for it to be verifiable, for it to be justified under “ideal” circumstances.
3) Deflationary theory of truth

This theory may seem to trivialize the issue of the nature of truth in that it focuses on the function that the word “true” (or “is true”) plays for us.

However, another way to view the theory is that it avoids the excesses of each of the other two theories: it avoids the assumption regarding the nature of reality that is central to the correspondence theory; and it avoids the conflation between truth and our practices of justification that seems central to the pragmatist theory. Insofar as we would like to say that “such and such may be true” even though we will never be in a position to know it is true, the deflationary theory enables us to say that without having to make “dogmatic” assumption regarding the nature of reality central to the correspondence theory.
The problems we have been discussing naturally give rise to two philosophical points of view. ... One of these perspectives is the perspective of metaphysical realism. On this perspective, the world consists of some fixed totality of mind-independent objects. There is exactly one true and complete description of 'the way the world is'. Truth involves some sort of correspondence relation between words or thought-signs and external things and sets of things. I shall call this perspective the externalist perspective, because its favorite point of view is a God's Eye point of view.

The perspective I shall defend has no unambiguous name. It is a late arrival in the history of philosophy, and even today it keeps being confused with other points of view of a quite different sort. I shall refer to it as the internalist perspective, because it is characteristic of this view to hold that what objects does the world consist off is a question that it only makes sense to ask within a theory or description. Many 'internalist' philosophers, though not all, hold further that there is more than one 'true' theory or description of the world. 'Truth', in an internalist view, is some sort of (idealized) 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 'states of affairs'. There is no God's Eye point of view that we can know or usefully imagine; there are only the various points of view of actual persons reflecting various interests and purposes that their descriptions and theories subserve. ('Coherence theory of truth'; 'Non-realism'; 'Verificationism'; 'Pluralism'; 'Pragmatism'; are all terms that have been applied to the internalist perspective ....) (Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, 1981)
Lotze has in several places made a deep suggestion. We naively assume, he says, a relation between reality and our minds which may be just the opposite of the true one. Reality, we naturally think, stands ready-made and complete, and our intellects supervene with the one simple duty of describing it as it is already. But may not our descriptions, Lotze asks, be themselves important additions to reality? And may not previous reality itself be there, far less for the purpose of reappearing unaltered in our knowledge, than for the very purpose of stimulating our minds to such additions as shall enhance the universe's total value.

The import of the difference between pragmatism and rationalism is now in sight throughout its whole extent. The essential contrast is that for rationalism reality is ready-made and complete from all eternity, while for pragmatism it is still in the making, and awaits part of its complexion from the future. On the one side the universe is absolutely secure, on the other it is still pursuing its adventures. (William James, *Pragmatism*, Lecture VII)
The great assumption of the intellectualists is that truth means essentially an inert static relation. When you've got your true idea of anything, there's an end of the matter. You're in possession; you know; you have fulfilled your thinking destiny. You are where you ought to be mentally; you have obeyed your categorical imperative; and nothing more need follow on that climax of your rational destiny. Epistemologically you are in stable equilibrium.

Pragmatism, on the other hand, 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 life? How will the truth be realized? What experiences will be different from those which would obtain if the belief were false? What, in short, is the truth's cash-value in experiential terms?"

The moment pragmatism asks this question, it sees the answer: true ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify. False ideas are those that we cannot. That is the practical difference it makes to us to have true ideas; that, therefore, is the meaning of truth, for it is all that truth is known-as. (James, Pragmatism, Lecture VI)
'The true,' to put it very briefly, is only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as 'the right' is only the expedient in the way of our behaving. Expedient in almost any fashion; and expedient in the long run and on the whole of course; for what meets expediently all the experience in sight won't necessarily meet all farther experiences equally satisfactorily. Experience, as we know, has ways of boiling over, and making us correct our present formulas.

The 'absolutely' true, meaning what no farther experience will ever alter, is that ideal vanishing-point towards which we imagine that all our temporary truths will some day converge. It runs on all fours with the perfectly wise man, and with the absolutely complete experience; and, if these ideals are ever realized, they will all be realized together. Meanwhile we have to live to-day by what truth we can get to-day, and be ready to-morrow to call it falsehood. Ptolemaic astronomy, euclidean space, aristotelian logic, scholastic metaphysics, were expedient for centuries, but human experience has boiled over those limits, and we now call these things only relatively true, or true within those borders of experience. 'Absolutely' they are false; for we know that those limits were casual, and might have been transcended by past theorists just as they are by present thinkers. (James, Pragmatism, Lecture VI)
Metaphysical Realism

The problems we have been discussing naturally give rise to two philosophical points of view. ... One of these perspectives is the perspective of metaphysical realism. On this perspective, the world consists of some fixed totality of mind-independent objects. There is exactly one true and complete description of 'the way the world is'. Truth involves some sort of correspondence relation between words or thought-signs and external things and sets of things. I shall call this perspective the externalist perspective, because its favorite point of view is a God's Eye point of view. (Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, 1981, Chapter 3)

“Mind-independent objects”: Different ways of understanding this phrase

One implication is that those objects are independent of our ability to know them, so that “mind-independence” allows for the possibility of scepticism.

Putnam’s main concern here, however, is with “independence” of our ways of categorizing and describing things.

On this view, what is “ultimately real” is independent of our system of concepts: our having concepts of entities of a certain sort does not automatically mean that there are entities of that sort in reality.

On this view, our task as thinkers is to try to make our concepts and language align with reality “as it is in itself”, so that we can “carve nature at its joints”.
Thus, in the history of philosophy, there have been debates among

- **Dualists** (e.g., Descartes): There is both mental and physical substance
- **Idealists** (e.g., Berkeley): There are only minds and ideas (and thus no material substance)
- **Materialists** (e.g., Hobbes): There is only matter (and thus no minds or ideas)

For Putnam, all these philosophers are “metaphysical realists”. They all hold that there is a “fixed totality of mind-independent objects”; they all take themselves to be identifying the entities that are “ultimately real”. They just differ on what those entities are.

- **Dualists** think those objects include both “mental” and “physical” entities; that they think that both minds and bodies are “ultimately real”.

- **Idealists** think that all that is ultimately real is mental in nature.

- **Materialists** think that all that is ultimately real is physical in nature.
One issue that “metaphysical realists”, like Idealists and Materialists, face is to account for the parts of our language that don’t map straightforwardly on to what (they think) is “ultimately real”.

Thus, idealists face an issue as to how to account for our (apparent) talk of physical objects (chairs, tables, etc.)

Materialists face an issue as to how to account for our (apparent) talk of mental entities (beliefs, desires, etc.)

But, again, for Putnam, all these philosophers are “metaphysical realists” in that they hold that

[T]he world consists of some fixed totality of mind-independent objects. There is exactly one true and complete description of 'the way the world is'. Truth involves some sort of correspondence relation between words or thought-signs and external things and sets of things.

Thus, for the idealist, any true belief will involve a correspondence between elements of our belief and “ultimately real” entities—namely, minds or ideas.

And, for the materialist, any true belief (which will itself ultimately be understood physically) will involve a correspondence between elements of our belief and “ultimately real” entities—namely, physical entities.
An Alternative to Pragmatist and Correspondence Theories of Truth  
(Quine, “Truth” in his *Quiddities*, 1987)

Philosophy primers tell of two opposing doctrines as to the nature of truth: the coherence theory and the correspondence theory. Neither theory, when naively stated, can be taken seriously. The coherence theory would have it that the truths qualify as such simply by all hanging together as a logically consistent system. The correspondence theory would have it that they qualify as true by corresponding to reality.

The coherence theory, thus baldly stated, seems to rest on an irrational rationalism—on the absurd idea that the infinite totality of possible statements admits of only one overall distribution of yesses and noes that is logically consistent. Moreover, the theory makes no visible demands on observation and experiment. On tis showing we can receive it only as a dummy doctrine, a straw man or whipping boy.

On the other hand the correspondence theory, as thus far stated, is vague or vacuous. What on the part of true sentences is meant to correspond to what on the part of reality? If we seek a correspondence word by word, we find ourselves eking reality out with a complement of abstract objects fabricated for the sake of the correspondence. Or perhaps we settle for a correspondence of whole sentences with *facts*: a sentence is true if it reports a fact. But here again we have fabricated substance for an empty doctrine. The world is full of things, variously related, but what, in addition to all that, are facts? They are projected from true sentences for the sake of correspondence.
But let us ponder this last maneuver for a moment. The truth of 'Snow is white' is due, we are told, to the fact that snow is white. The true sentence 'Snow is white' corresponds to the fact that snow is white. The sentence 'Snow is white' is true if and only if it is a fact that snow is white. Now we have worked the fact, factitious fiction that it is, into a corner where we can deal it the coup de grace. The combination 'it is a fact that' is vacuous and can be dropped; 'It is a fact that snow is white' reduces to 'Snow is white'. Our account of the truth of 'Snow is white' in terms of facts has now come down to this: 'Snow is white' is true if and only if snow is white.

Here, as Tarski has urged, is the significant residue of the correspondence theory of truth. To attribute truth to the sentence is to attribute whiteness to the snow. Attribution of truth to 'Snow is white' just cancels the quotation marks and says that snow is white. Truth is disquotation. An ignominious end, one may feel, to the correspondence theory of truth. But we shall see later that it is more gnominious than it looks.

Coherence and correspondence, properly considered, are not rival theories of truth, but complementary aspects. The coherence [and pragmatic] aspect has to do with how to arrive at truth, by the best of our lights. The correspondence aspect has to do with the relation of truths to what they are about. (Quine, *Quiddities*)
We saw the correspondence theory dwindle to disquotation. The attribution of truth to a statement is equated to the statement itself. This has been called the disappearance theory of truth, but unjustly; the quotation marks are not to be taken lightly. What can justly be said is that the adjective 'true' is dispensable when attributed to sentences that are explicitly before us. Where it is not thus dispensable is in saying that all or some sentences of such and such a specified form are or are not true, or that someone's statement unavailable for quotation was or was not true, or that the libel laws do not apply to true statements, or that you will tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God. In such contexts, when paraphrased to fit predicate logic, what stands as subject of the truth predicate is not a quotation but a variable. It is there that the truth predicate is not to be lightly dismissed. (Quine, *Quiddities*)
Peirce was tempted to define truth outright in terms of scientific method, as the ideal theory which is approached as a limit when the (supposed) canons of scientific method are used unceasingly on continuing experience. But there is a lot wrong with Peirce's notion, besides its assumption of a final organon of scientific method and its appeal to an infinite process. There is a faulty use of numerical analogy in speaking of a limit of theories, since the notion of limit depends on that of "nearer than," which is defined for numbers and not for theories. And even if we by-pass such troubles by identifying truth somewhat fancifully with the ideal result of applying scientific method outright to the whole future totality of surface irritations, still there is trouble in the imputation of uniqueness ("the ideal result"). For, as urged two pages back, we have no reason to suppose that man's surface irritations even unto eternity admit of any one systematization that is scientifically better or simpler than all possible others. It seems likelier, if only on account of symmetries or dualities, that countless alternative theories would be tied for first place. Scientific method is the way to truth, but it affords even in principle no unique definition of truth. Any so-called pragmatic definition of truth is doomed to failure equally. (Quine, *Word and Object*, 1960)
It is rather when we turn back into the midst of an actually present theory, at least hypothetically accepted, that we can and do speak sensibly of this and that sentence as true. Where it makes sense to apply 'true' is to a sentence couched in the terms of a given theory and seen from within the theory, complete with its posited reality. Here there is no occasion to invoke even so much as the imaginary codification of scientific method. To say that the statement ‘Brutus killed Caesar' is true, or that 'The atomic weight of sodium is 23' is true, is in effect simply to say that Brutus killed Caesar, or that the atomic weight of sodium is 23. That the statements are about posited entities, are significant only in relation to a surrounding body of theory, and are justifiable only by supplementing observation with scientific method, no longer matters; for the truth attributions are made from the point of view of the same surrounding body of theory, and are in the same boat.

Have we now so far lowered our sights as to settle for a relativistic doctrine of truth — rating the statements of each theory as true for that theory, and brooking no higher criticism? Not so. The saving consideration is that we continue to take seriously our own particular aggregate science, our own particular world-theory or loose total fabric of quasi-theories, whatever it may be. Unlike Descartes, we own and use our beliefs of the moment, even in the midst of philosophizing, until by what is vaguely called scientific method we change them here and there for the better. Within our own total evolving doctrine, we can judge truth as earnestly and absolutely as can be; subject to correction, but that goes without saying. (Quine, *Word and Object*)
We began by looking at the argument, common to Williams, Nagel and others, that even in arguing that in a given area of discourse, there is no truth, we are committing ourselves to recognizing some truths in at least some areas of discourse.

Then we looked at two different ways of attempting to characterize “the nature of truth”: one (the correspondence theory) that assumes that there is a way that the world is “in itself” and makes truth a matter of correspondence to that world; the other, that rejects that metaphysical assumption and instead ties “the nature of truth” to our (idealized) epistemic practices.

Quine, it seems to me, offers us a way to take truth seriously without either assuming the “God’s eye view” that we are in no position to occupy that is central to the correspondence theory or accepting the reduction of truth to our epistemic practices that is central to pragmatist theories. We can “earnestly” judge what is true and false; but doing so does not require accepting either the correspondence or pragmatist theories of truth.
Some references:

Bertrand Russell, “On the Nature of Truth and Falsehood” (1910), in his *Philosophical Essays*

William James, *Pragmatism*, 1907

Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*, 2002


W. V. Quine, *Quiddities*, 1987