

The current “pragmatic turn” in cognitive science has led to a shift in how we understand cognition, but Pragmatism also has a lot to tell us about our understanding of *truth*.

Introduction

The current “pragmatic turn” has led to a paradigmatic shift in the philosophy of cognitive science toward 4E Cognition, but so far there has not been a concomitant shift in how we understand *truth*. According to classical pragmatist philosophers like William James and FCS Schiller, the philosophy of Pragmatism (from which the current “turn” takes its name) is first and foremost a conception of truth, so its absence in the emerging 4E literature is conspicuous. Sorting through theories of truth may seem like a recondite topic best left for traditional philosophy without much connection to cognitive science, but from a pragmatic (4E) outlook, nothing could be more relevant. **I argue that a pragmatic conception of truth is not only the most descriptively accurate but also the most apt to the cognitive domain.** This poster represents some introductory thoughts from a much wider discussion.

Mind, Reality, Truth

1

CORRESPONDENCE

The traditional notion of truth as correspondence to reality envisions a *world-independent mind* somehow apprehending a *mind-independent world*, usually expressed in terms of “propositions” matching up with “facts.” This correspondence between the mind and reality can be stated in analytic terms, such as:

A proposition is true iff it corresponds with reality.

OR, “p” expresses [p] which corresponds to <p>

The problem is not with the language of “correspondence” itself, but with its metaphysical assumptions vis-a-vis current cognitive science. And aside from its problematic metaphysical backdrop, the correspondence theory of truth is analytically *trivial* and explanatorily *vague*; it doesn’t provide a sense of what is meant by either “correspond” or “reality.”

PRAGMATISM

The pragmatic conception of truth adopts a different set of metaphysical assumptions, and rejects the traditional notion of correspondence as usually conceived.

First, Pragmatism denies the mind-world dualism, viewing a mind-independent world and a world-independent mind as fundamentally impossible. Instead, the organism and its environs are, cognitively speaking, a *unity*.

Second, it views reality as both *real* and *partially constructed*, in the sense that an organism enacts its environment by way of its particular methods of perception. Thus, “reality” is (and only can be) *reality-as-perceived*, i.e. from our embodied perspective.

Third, what an organism accomplishes via cognition is the disambiguation of the flux of embodied experience through active experimentation, which leads to categorization, which then enables inference, and so on.

Truth, then, is the broad coherence of different parts of experience (or, practical interaction with *reality-as-perceived*) that is efficacious with respect to our goals and purposes (i.e. our values). If an idea is true, it will “work” in this broad pragmatic sense.

The usual analytic expression of the pragmatic criterion of truth (i.e. *a proposition is true iff it works*) doesn’t adequately express the pragmatic approach to truth.

The Nature of Pragmatic Truth

3

PRAGMATIC TRUTH *IS*...

- Properly subjective and perspectival
- Relative to embodied knowers
- Diachronic (no deployment of the myth)
- Contingent (constantly subject to update)
- Descriptive of actual human knowledge
- Accords with human cognition and perception

PRAGMATIC TRUTH *IS NOT*...

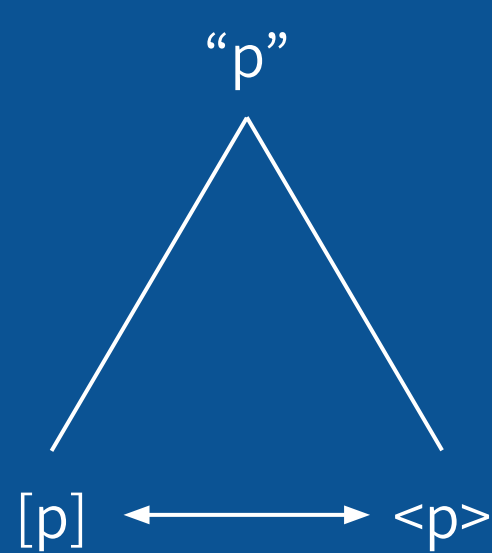
- Nihilistic or anti-truth
- Analytically trivial
- Metaphysically problematic
- Self-defeating or contradictory
- Crass expediency or license to be dishonest
- Correspondence with (copying of) reality

“The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made true by events.”
—William James [1]

SOME LOGICAL ISSUES WITH “OBJECTIVE” OR “ABSOLUTE” TRUTH

- How can we know that we have attained it?
- How can we sort between what will turn out to be falsehoods and what will remain truths?
- If we posit something like *verisimilitude* (“truthlikeness”; approximation to truth) [2], how can we know what that is if we cannot be sure what truth looks like?
- If the idea of absolute truth is not merely a myth, what work does it do in our theory of knowledge?

CORRESPONDENCE SCHEMA [3]



“OBJECTIVE” TRUTHS THROUGHOUT THE CENTURIES

- 3rd c. BCE *p* = “Rocks fall to return to their natural place.”
- 17th c *p* = “Combustible substances contain phlogiston.”
- 18th c *p* = “Some species spontaneously generate.”
- 19th c *p* = “Diseases are caused by a *miasma*.”
- 20th c *p* = “Time intervals are the same for all observers.”

At every stage of human knowledge, the traditional correspondence notion of truth is:
(a) *metaphysically problematic* (see box #1), and
(b) *analytically trivial* (see here).

The Diachronicity of Actual Truth

2

TRUTH IS DIACHRONIC

Truth as we actually know it is *diachronic*, meaning that it evolves and changes over time. We gain some facts about the world, we construct something like a paradigm, we reckon what is true relative to that paradigm. That is, until our experience (often in the form of intentional experimentation) yields new facts, the paradigm is adjusted, expanded, or broken (in what Kuhn called a “scientific revolution”[4]), leading to a new paradigm, and so the process continues. This can be seen on an individual as well as a collective level.

THE MYTH OF ABSOLUTE TRUTH

At each stage of the process, with the construction of each world paradigm, we deploy a cultural myth: that of “absolute” or “objective” truth. Eventually, we find out that what we were so sure was the truth is actually either not fully true or false. Then, we shift to a new position (or, paradigm) and deploy the myth again.

Truth in the Pragmatic Turn

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REFERENCES

- [1] James, William. *Pragmatism: A New Name for some Old Ways of Thinking* (1907).
- [2] Popper, Karl. *Objective Knowledge* (1972).
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- [4] Kuhn, Thomas. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962).

THANKS TO:

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