

Plato High School Essay Contest 2018

Title: Truth, a Pragmatic Account

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Ashwin is a 16-year-old high school junior at Bellarmine College Preparatory in San Jose, California. He first discovered philosophy through the normative ethical theories of Immanuel Kant, and his interest in philosophy has since branched out toward broader metaphysical questions. He also enjoys playing classical guitar and is heavily involved in speech and debate.

Truth, a Pragmatic Account

Society has many different methods of justifying statements and propositions. The difficulty in understanding the concept of truth lies in sorting through the myriad of these distinct methods of justification. Truth itself comes from evaluating a statement and determining that the statement is valid. However, this definition is insufficient to explain how statements can be deemed true or false. Many people, like Mark, believe that statements can only be considered true when they correspond to some sort of external and objective reality that is independent of how people experience that external world. Some people, like Tony, argue that the only account of true statements which matter are those which are internally coherent with other statements in that belief system. Others, like Lisa, hold that the value of truth should be assigned to statements which work pragmatically within the experience of the external world. We can use human intuition and intense epistemic skepticism to shed light on the underlying assumptions of knowledge and to test these various views of truth.

In the case of the riverboat, Mark argues that “sentences are true when they correspond to facts.” This view is described as correspondence theory. At first, this theory appeals greatly to human intuition and common sense. Correspondence theory evaluates statements based on their relation to an objective, external reality. This idea of objectivity, while initially appealing, falls prey to epistemic skepticism. In order to have any sort of objectivity, we must take an epistemologically realist position about the external world. This view entails two specific premises. First, objects in the external world exist. Second, the existence of these objects is completely independent of those who experience this existence¹. These premises also indicate

¹ See Schantz, pg. 477

that the objective nature of the external world does not conform exactly to our mode of cognition. Since objects exist independently of human experience of them, the visual perceptions of a person with seriously impaired vision would often be false. The premise that objects exist independently of human experience is the necessary condition for any sort of objectivity. The difficulty with this objectivity is that our perceptions are extremely fallible. Additionally, our cognition represents things in very specific and contingent ways. For example, the colors in a human's visible spectrum of light only constitute a very short range of electromagnetic wavelengths; however, electromagnetic waves of several invisible wavelengths bounce off objects all the time. Since the objective reality which correspondence theory considers to be philosophically significant does not conform to the limited human mode of cognition, evaluating a statement's relationship to external reality requires that humans step out from behind the veil of their own perceptions to compare their perceptions and representations of events involved in the statement to that objective reality. This requirement necessitates that correspondence theory will always succumb to epistemic skepticism, for humans are fundamentally incapable of evaluating events without their limited perceptions.

The problem of epistemological realism requires that, although counter-intuitive, epistemological anti-realism must be accepted to allow for the possibility of any kind of truth. Anti-realism holds that the objects of the external world which are philosophically significant to us are the ones made up of our perceptions². This new definition of the external world, being constituted by human cognition, always conforms to the human mode of cognition. Radically

² See Schantz, pg. 478

changing the nature of truth, anti-realism focuses on the way that statements relate to human experience.

Tony's perspective in the case of the riverboat adheres to anti-realism. Tony believes that statements which are consistent with other previously-held beliefs should be considered true. Drawing upon entire groups of information perceived by humans, this view of truth concerns itself only with the world constituted by human senses. This system of belief is known as coherentism. The major tenet of coherentism is that the justification needed for propositions and statements does not proceed linearly. This means that there are no foundational beliefs which ground everything else. Rather, this system holds that no individual source of information is truly reliable, and only the coherence of several different sources of information can lend justification to an entire system of related statements and beliefs³. These different propositions within systems of belief must also be carefully weigh with considerations of how probable those statements are and of how reliable their sources are. The difficulty with this form of justification is that it relies so very heavily on human memory. For coherentism to function in any manner, it must draw upon a very wide-ranging set of information and beliefs. Since this theory is primarily concerned with human experience, most of these beliefs and information are events and circumstance which must be observed and then recalled. As such, every system of belief is always justified using different bits of information which pass through the human faculty of memory; however, it proves very difficult to determine the reliability of human memory without also accepting that there is some sort of external objective reality outside of memory itself, and this notion of transcendental objectivity is the same issue which previously made the correspondence theory of

³ See Olsson, pg. 258

truth infeasible; with the idea of objectivity, skepticism always triumphs. Even if one accepts that memory is at least somewhat reliable, no one can possibly determine the degree to which it is reliable, so no basis can be established for accepting any information that comes from memory. After all, coherentism relies on having reliable sources of probable information. In this way, coherentism also falls to epistemic skepticism. Additionally, even without looking to skepticism, human intuition also undermines this theory. One can feasibly imagine a set of beliefs which cohere internally at every level yet in no way describe the situations and circumstances which people generally experience. Beginning from a flawed starting point yields flawed results, so even human intuition points away from this theory of truth.

In this case of the riverboat, the only view of truth which finally begets a positive result is Lisa's view that statements are true because they work. In technical terms, this is a pragmatist epistemology. At the foundation of this theory of knowledge is the idea that looking at the empirical consequences of concepts is the only justification for truth⁴. Truth only matters insofar as it relates to human practices. As a result of this way of thinking, the pragmatic account of truth can only be elucidated through inquiry into human experience, circumstances, and actions. Those statements and propositions which encompass truth are the useful beliefs which rarely ever lead to undesirable answers and consequences. Since this view of truth and knowledge concerns itself entirely with human experience and avoids transcendental objectivity, it is clearly an extension of epistemological anti-realism. Moreover, pragmatism does not succumb to epistemic skepticism because it fundamentally redefines truth and knowledge. Rather than reducing truth to external objectivity or probabilistic calculations, pragmatism holds that truth is that which is

⁴ See Misak, pg. 861

useful in relation to human experience, and there is no doubt that the senses can determine whether beliefs have been empirically useful for experience. It is fitting that the procedure of inquiry into human experience is so heavily stressed within pragmatic epistemology because this kind of inquiry is the basis of the scientific method which characterizes modern human action. An important note regarding Lisa's view is that she does not consider her statement true until she has attempted to determine its result. This inquiry into experience is the fundamental process that underlies Lisa's view of truth; statements are true because they have been empirically verified to produce a positive result. In the case of the riverboat, the friends go through the process of inquiry by taking the specific action of walking along the stream. Since the end result of that inquiry was positive, the friends had verified the original statement that following the stream would lead to the mansion and thus had also proven that statement true.

In the search for truth, society often demands complete objectivity. However, while an objective external reality that transcends human experience sounds ideal and valuable, it fundamentally subverts any human attempt to find truth. Humans are fallible, but this does not mean that humans cannot and should not evaluate statements and propositions. Truth still has meaning even if it fails to be perfectly objective because the subject of experience still matters. It is for this very reason that the evaluation of truth must come from the empirical concerns of a human subject. By inquiring into the world around us, we can find valid justification for truth, a pragmatic account of human experience.

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