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The Correspondence Theory of Truth and its Fallacious Implications for Epistemology

Etorobong Godwin Akpan, Remigius Achinike Obah

*Department of Philosophy University of Port Harcourt Port Harcourt, Rivers State Nigeria
etorobong.akpan@gmail.com*

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ANNOTATION

The paper is concerned with an analysis of the notion of the correspondence theory of truth. The study is conducted with a view to correcting the problem associated with the formulation of the said theory, which is responsible for the proliferation of the essence of truth through its different criteria and the emergence of fallacies and skepticism in epistemology. The study adopted content analysis as its method. It is the argument of the paper that, although the essence of truth is correspondence, its reformulation as theory is necessary. The study concludes by reformulating the concept of truth as the correspondence of a statement and its referent, in the face a definite experience, to a statement and its referent for such patterns of experience, set as a standard in the foundational linguistic permutations of ontology within any language.

KEYWORDS: Fallacies, Skepticism, Epistemology and Truth.

INTRODUCTION

Logic textbooks are quick to define a proposition as anything that could be said to be true or false (Barwise & Etchemendy, 2003). This definition, though functional in logical analysis, lacks metaphysical value. It fails in presenting a detailed ontology of the proposition. Hence, it is not of much value in the philosophy of language. But it has value in this paper, in the sense that it keeps alive the question concerning the meaning of truth and falsity. What is truth? An abstract approach to the analysis of the concept of truth is often thought to be very misleading. Hence, philosophers are quick to move the question from a theoretical question to a functional one: how do we distinguish between truth and falsity? The essence of the functional question is to identify the criterion for truth. Such a formulation of the problem is at least more familiar in epistemology. There are many responses to this question in the history of philosophy. Such answers include correspondence, coherence, pragmatic theories of truth, etc.

But there is an idea that is central to the determination of the criterion for truth that is often avoided because it is thought to be misleading. It is the idea of the 'truthness' of truth or what makes truth what it is, that is, being true. Philosophers sometimes write as though different criteria for truth are the same as different essences of truth. Truth cannot have more than one essence. So, the proliferation of the criteria for truth

cannot be said to be identical with the expression of the essences of truth. Besides, criteria for truth could better be understood as a method of identification of a true statement but not the essence of truth. The question “what is truth?” is a question about essence, not one about method or criterion for distinguishing between truth and falsity.

In addressing itself to the question of the essence of truth, this paper argues that the idea of truth is essentially identical with the notion of correspondence. But there is an early warning here not to confuse this notion of correspondence with the formulation of the correspondence theory of truth. It is rather the argument of the paper that the formulation of correspondence in the correspondence theory of truth is fraught with errors, leading to serious fallacious consequences for epistemological research. Hence, to overcome these difficulties, the paper has put forward a proposed theory of truth that is essentially correspondent but not identical with the old theory.

The purpose of the paper is to delineate the essence of truth and then use it as a framework for its definition and the statement of its criterion. This essay is warranted by the confusion of the essence of truth with its different criteria. The method adopted to achieve these objectives is content analysis. The primary and secondary data for the study were drawn from the writings of philosophers on the topic of truth.

The Fundamentality of the Notion of Correspondence in the Meaning of Truth

Representational semantics and its consequent picture the autonomous theory of language and the exclusivist object-oriented correspondence theory of truth are responsible for the autonomous theory of language. The reason is that the condition for meaning is the same as the condition for truth. Within the context of representational semantics, words are pictures and the world their referent. The absence of predicative reference has given rise to unending controversies. The same problem is the skepticism associated with the search for foundations within the absolutely object-oriented correspondent framework. Such skepticism has led to the presentation of alternative theories of truth like coherence, pragmatic, semantic, redundant, relative theories etc. But it is noteworthy that all other theories of truth are what they are because of their dependence on the correspondence essence of truth. Apart from being the most popular and the oldest theory of truth, it is equally commonsensical. Even though philosophy often tends to demonstrate the naiveté of commonsense, it is important to note that therein lies the standard for the evaluation of philosophical ideals. It is the reason for which epistemology assumed the status of privileged cognition. Science is what it is, because it is simply the swelling of commonsense. Consequently, the theory of truth that is more commonsensical is more endearing to science.

As a matter of fact, the fundamentality of the correspondence theory of truth is established on the grounds that it is presupposed by all other theories of truth, and it is more realistic and comes so much closer to demonstrating what truth is in ordinary and scientific parlance than the others. The traditional definition of the correspondent theory is that “truth is the quality of being the case, of being factual, and of being correct and right as a pictorial category” (Ozumba, 2001, p.68). “Pictorialism” is the bane of representational semantics and the absolute object-oriented correspondent theory of truth. Within the correspondence theory of truth, a true statement would be expected to state how things are. Wittgenstein (1961) believes that it is supposed to be a correct picture of reality. Major philosophical systems, starting from the idealism of Plato to the naturalism of Quine, are predicated on the legitimacy of this view of truth. Even the so-called “rationalist” philosophies are not spared from relying tacitly on the validity of the correspondence theory of truth.

But the reason why most scholars tend to pretend that there could be other grounds for the establishment of truth outside the correspondence theory is predicated on a lack of understanding of the nature of the relationship between language and reality. The idea of correspondence, according to which language is said to mirror reality, is inappropriate. Language and reality do not belong to the same category of existence. It is not possible, therefore, for one to mirror the other. Words are ordinarily symbols referring to events. Thus, the search for truth in language is a symbolism affair, which takes definite ontological contexts seriously. Nonetheless, traditional philosophy never presents the matter in this light. Rather, philosophers are used to the picture theory above and have also moved into using demonstratives for truths as theories of truth. The referential realist view of the role of language is therefore responsible for the suspicious perception of the correspondence theory of truth. Yet the theory is ultimately the foundation of other theories of truth.

A critical analysis of any theory of truth reveals that it demands the correspondence theory of truth to be a theory of truth at all. For instance, "the coherent theory of truth is defined as the conformity of statements with other already established bodies of statements" (Lehre, 1993, p.68). Here, it is demanded that, in a strong case of coherence, the basic beliefs be self-evident with no need for justification. But what is "self-evidence"? The concept of self-evidence is hooked up with the concept of correspondence with reality. A statement is self-evident if it states how things are without any need for further investigation. It is self-evident if it is an unquestionable picture of reality. For instance, that "doubting is thinking" is unquestionable within our English understanding of the concepts involved in the expression and their domains. Thus, it gave Descartes no trouble to discover that he was thinking. Even though he made an epistemological leap to argue that to think there must be an agent, he got the basics right, that "doubting is thinking." The problem is that coherent theory relies on a correlative foundation to demonstrate the truths of statements within a formalistic framework. But one may respond here that a synonym is not the same as a correspondent. Again, how is synonymy established without going back to how language is used in relation to reality? Ultimately, if truth is a property of language and language is a symbol system that somehow relates to reality, and then synonymy must be established by some sort of reference to that reality. Such reference is what philosophers call "correspondence," though their idea of correspondence by picturing is suspect.

Pragmatism as a philosophical system has many orientations. But among the different strands, three are considered more fundamental. They include Peirce, James, and Dewey. Schiller could, however, be included in the list. In Peirce's pragmatism:

"It identifies the truth with the hypothetical final upshot of scientific inquiry and the real with the object of opinion." "Truth is that concordance of a... statement with the ideal limit towards which endless investigation would tend to bring scientific beliefs:"... any truth more perfect than this destined conclusion, any reality more absolute than what is thought in it, is a fiction of metaphysics" (Haack, 1993, p. 353).

The correspondent context of Peirce's analysis is the concordance of a statement with the destined conclusive opinion of science. Dewey calls it the "opinion fated to be agreed upon by all investigators" (Haack, 1993, p.354). James and Schiller, however, are more radical and particular. James argues that "the truth... is the satisfactory and useful in the way of belief; true belief works" (Haack, 1993, p.354). The idea of being useful is connected with the problem of need. Workability is dependent on a certain form of standard for evaluation. Thus, the workability of a theory is determined by its correspondence to the standard for resolving a given need. Schiller's calls "the truth" "what is valued by us" (Haack, 1993, p.354). In Schiller's analysis, the truth corresponds with the value. So, even though pragmatism is skepticism of the object, it is not skepticism of knowledge. Yet the truth on which it depends is correspondence to standards.

The dialectical theory of truth is the grasp of the whole at the end of the evolution of contradictions (Ozumba, 2001). This expected totality is the real picture at the end of synthesis. In its anticipation of the whole for the attainment of truth, the dialectical theory of truth is a correspondence outlook in the Hegelian framework.

Tarski's demonstration of the semantic theory shows that it is a correspondence theory of truth. The redundant theory of truth assumes representational semantics and thus turns to the argument that the addition of the truth predicate is redundant. In the assumption of representational semantics, the redundant theory of truth is a presupposition of the correspondent necessity for the truth of a statement.

Some philosophers have championed a relativistic theory of truth. But one who is familiar with Protagoras' relativism knows that it is skepticism of the objective realm of absolute reference. On the whole, the correspondence theory of truth remains not only "the oldest and the most acceptable" (Ozumba, 2001, p.72) in philosophical discourse, but it is supposed to be the most appropriate theory of truth if properly stated. Consequently, its proper understanding is necessary for a sound epistemology.

Fallacious Implications of Erroneous Formulation of the Correspondence Theory of Truth

The bane of epistemological research is the erroneous statement of the correspondence theory of truth. This error is connected with the evil of referential realism, which understands propositions to have a one – one correspondent relation between symbols and reality; a relation of picturing reality. But such an assumption is again fraught with the problem of category error and will necessarily lead to fallacious conclusions. Here, conclusions that promote the cognitive autocracy of the object in epistemology are inevitable. So, it will not be out of place to arrive at the fallacy of absolute objective standpoint in the search for the foundations of knowledge or the fallacy of ontological convenience in finding an ontological realm on which to predicate knowledge claims.

Cognitive autocracy of the object is a behavioural orientation assigned to the components of propositions in the search for the foundations of truth. The orientation is predicated on the attitude of epistemologists, according to which the object of experience is assigned an active voice, while the cognitive agent (subject) is assigned a passive voice in foundational analysis, without any justification. Such an orientation explains why John Locke refers to the human mind as a tabularaza (Stumpf, 1982). The cognitive autocracy of the object could equally be referred to as the totalitarianism of the object. Such a totalitarian orientation leads to the fallacy of absolute objective standpoint, which is a thesis that all knowledge claims can be conclusively justified the moment the object of experience alone is identified. It is an exclusivist thesis because it excludes all other inputs that make knowledge possible. Hence, an attempt to demonstrate the foundations of truth is reduced to the exclusive search for the nature of the cognitive object. Such a reduction is responsible for some false submissions that claim that epistemology and metaphysics are identical. Another problem associated with this reductionism is often the inability to completely identify a matching relationship between the proposition and external reality. The absence of a direct picture of the structure of the proposition in the structure of reality leads to another fallacy, which is the fallacy of ontological convenience. This fallacy is the assumption that the structure of the proposition could be satisfied by positing the existence of some putative domain of entities. A typical example of this assumption is Platonism. These consequent fallacies and orientations are a product of stating that a proposition is true if it states how things are or that "adequatio rei ad intellectum" – meaning that truth is the adequacy of the thing and the intellect. Such a statement of the correspondence theory of truth is problematic because there is no way a proposition can correspond in a one – one form to reality. Hence, fallacies abound.

Fallacies exist generally with respect to arguments, beliefs, assertions, or knowledge claims. Within those contexts, they represent invalidity on the basis of falsehood or error. They are close to being the opposite of the truth. All fallacious arguments are, however, false. Thus defined, the claim regarding the cognitive autocracy of the object embedded in the traditional epistemic system is fallacious. It is fallacious because knowledge is not the exclusive preserve of the object. Language is not autonomous. It is better understood in its context of use. Thus, to properly study speech is to do so by speaking. Studied in speaking, statements qua statements are symbols with references given by the speech tradition. The implication of this is the non-tenability of representational semantics that gives to the correspondence theory of truth the view of the cognitive autocracy of the object and the absolute object-oriented theory of justification. The objective world does not possess all that it takes to justify knowledge. Successful justification or complete matching of claims with foundations is only attainable by understanding knowledge as the cooperation of the subject and object of cognition.

An operation within the context of the fallacy of the absolute objective theory of justification of normative epistemology is responsible for skepticism in epistemology. All attempts to overcome skepticism within the same traditional framework have led to completely promoting the fallacy of ontological convenience. This fallacy could be extended to include the assumption that the problem of skepticism could be settled by either the reduction or the exaggeration of the domain of reference to a convenient ontology. But the error in such an assumption is demonstrated by the fact that no amount of the implementation of this policy or ideology has solved the problem of skepticism. The foundation of skepticism lies in the revolt of the cognitive subject against an autocracy that eliminates it in foundational analysis. The problem of skepticism is never resolved by ontological convenience. This epistemological culture is inadequate. To successfully carry out the project, knowledge must be understood as the cooperation of the subject and the object. To do this, knowledge would have to be studied in depth. The neglect of this important factor and the consequent institution of armed chair epistemology and its attendant ontological convenience is responsible for all the ruins in the history of traditional epistemology.

Reformulation of the Correspondence Theory of Truth

To achieve a comprehensive foundational analysis of truth, a behavioural constructivist approach to epistemology must be adopted. Here, the justification of statements turns investigative because of the presupposition of the inputs of the cognitive agent to the possibility of the proposition. In this approach, referents for the proposition are arrived at by acknowledging that it is a report about the cognitive activity of the subject of experience on its object. Hence, such a referent is in the cognitive past and cannot be found in the object of current experience. In that past, the reference is about the object in the world and the cognitive act of the subject, which is the becoming of a predicative referent (the class). The class or the relation expressed by the proposition is a product of the cognitive constructive behaviour of the cognitive agent and is therefore not given in experience as an individual. Since the predicate is not an individual in experience, the formulation of the correspondence theory of truth as an adequacy of the thing and the intellect is defeated. Hence, to overcome the above complications associated with the correspondence theory of truth, the theory is reformulated below. The reformulation is defined from the viewpoint of implicative referential semantics of constative sentences and it takes into view the definite linguistic permutation of ontology as the basis for recursion in establishing correspondence. Hence, truth can be defined as the correspondence of a statement and its referent, in the face of a definite experience, to a statement and its referent for such pattern of experience, set as a standard in the foundational linguistic permutations of ontology within any language.

Thus, it satisfies the demand for correspondence between symbol and symbol, referent and referent, and implication and implication. Its coordinative structure achieves the coherent theoretic requirement. It takes care of the perviousness or criteria or standard demand of pragmatism and also perfects Tarski's contribution by the introduction of foundational permutations.

An important point scored by this theory is its ability to present the correspondence theory of truth without the cognitive autocracy of the object promoted by representational semantics and its absolute object-oriented epistemology of truth. The above demonstration, in which the arbitrary permutation of ontology with language is the standard for recursive definition, shows the importance of the subject and offers it its due.

Conclusion

The concept of correspondence is central to the common-sense conception of truth. "Common sense" is a phrase that describes the human natural predisposition to ideas. So, the concept of truth as a correspondence between experience and proposition appears to be natural to humans. But the details of what that correspondence entails have been taken for granted for a long time in the history of philosophy. Naïve epistemology presents this correspondence as a picture and goes ahead to formulate a correspondence theory of truth that ends up generating fallacies. These fallacies do not arise because the notion of truth as correspondence is erroneous, but because the formulation of the correspondence theory of truth is done in error. The paper has shown that the idea of correspondence properly understood presupposes the origin of the particular language within which a specific knowledge claim is expressed. Correspondence in the correct sense of the notion would be correspondence or consistency with the original standards for the use of language in the face of distinct experiences. Consequently, truth in the right sense of the word would imply the correct use of language as a report of definite experiences or the prediction of the same. Such a definition makes truth a property of language but not a property of experience, because experience, whether correctly reported or not, does not change its features. Experience cannot be said to be true or false, but reports about it could be. Hence, truth as correspondence is not correspondence between language and experience but rather correspondence between a present use of language in the face of a definite experience and the standard lexicon for doing so, drawn from a particular speech community and its original ontological permutation of its universe with language.

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