

Four Theories of Truth

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Directions: The following six pages give an account of four different theories of truth. For **1 point** toward Exam #1, read the following six pages and then complete one of the following two activities:

Activity #1: Write a concise (in 200 words or so) argument that defends one of the four theories of truth. In order to receive all three points, you must: (i) clearly and unequivocally state which of the four theories you are arguing for and (ii) give two distinct (and non-subjective) reasons why the theory you take to be true is, in fact, true.

Activity #2: Respond (in 200 words or so) to someone else's argument in one of two ways: (1) by **accepting** their argument and then offering additional reasons why their position is the correct one or by developing one of their reasons in a more convincing or explicit way OR (2) by **rejecting** their argument and then arguing why at least one of the reasons they give in support of their view does not, in fact, support their conclusion.

Due Date: *Prior to the Exam #1 Due Date*

Where to Post: Your post MUST be submitted to the Yammer discussion thread that I have started on this topic. You can find this thread by searching for "FourTheoriesOfTruth" in the Yammer search bar OR you can email me to bring the thread to the top of the PHIL012 Symbolic Logic Yammer Page. If it is emailed to me, or posted in a separate thread, or posted late, you will not receive the three points added toward Exam #1.

In the first three chapters, the notion of "truth" and "falsity" has been used as the value assigned to propositions (wffs) and has been played a rule in the truth-table method. At this point, however, we have not given a definition of either of these notions. In what follows, **four** theories about what it means for a proposition to be true are considered. In presenting these theories, it is important to keep in mind that (i) there are several variants on each theory and (ii) only the simplest version will be introduced here. In other words, the following only scratches the surface of a complex and ongoing discussion about an important logical, philosophical, and practical notion.

1. Theory #1: Aristotelian Theories

Aristotle defined it as follows:

Aristotelian Account of Truth: "To say that that which is is and that which is not is not, is true."¹

This definition corresponds with how we have been using the notion in that we take sentences like "snow is white" to be true if and only if it is, in fact, the case that *snow is white*, and, "hippos fly" to be false if and only if it is, in fact, the case that *hippos do not fly*.

¹ See *Metaphysics* 1011b25

There are two main problems with the Aristotelian definition of truth. The first is that while the Aristotelian account tells us what it means for a proposition to be true or false, it does not tell us what makes a proposition true or false. Is truth a property of *saying* or of *propositions*? If so, what kind of property is it? Does it refer to something in the world? Does it belong to sentences, acts of sayings, propositions? This is not to say that the Aristotelian account is false, just that it is incomplete, i.e., it does not sufficiently answer a question that we think a definition of truth should give.

While the Aristotelian account of truth is intuitive and works well for a variety of sentences, unfortunately, there is a type of sentence known as *liar sentences* that the Aristotelian account has difficulty handling. Liar sentences produce a counter-intuitive result for the Aristotelian account of truth in that they are sentences that come out *both true and false*. Consider the following sentence:

(1): This sentence is false.

(1) is known as a *liar sentence* in that it attributes falsity to itself. To see clearly why this type of sentence causes problem for the Aristotelian Account of Truth, consider the following:

Assume (1) is true: If (1) is true, then what (1) says is the case. What (1) says is that (1) is not the case, and so (1) is, in fact, false. *Therefore, (1) is both true and false.*

Assume (1) is false: If (1) is false, then what (1) says is **not** the case. What (1) says is that (1) is not the case, and so (1) is, in fact, true. *Therefore, (1) is both true and false.*

Many find the above result to be counterintuitive and the problem created by liar sentences for the Aristotelian account of truth is known as the *liar paradox*. While there are some important ways in which philosophers and logicians have dissolved this paradox, they will not be addressed here.

2. Inflationary Theories

The next two theories of truth considered are sometimes called *inflationary theories*. A theory of truth is considered **inflationary** if it considers the notion of truth as referring to a property of propositions. In saying that “truth” refers to a property of propositions, it is helpful to think about properties belonging to concrete objects. Suppose you see a fat black cat sitting on a mat. The cat sits up and walks over to a white puppy. We say that the fat black cat has certain properties. It has the property of *being fat* and the property of *being black* and the property of *being a cat*. These are properties belonging to the cat and do not concern (at least on the surface level) other things in the world. But the cat also has properties in its relation to other things. The black fat cat has the property of *being bigger than the puppy* or *darker than the puppy*. These are sometimes called “relational properties”, they are properties that a thing has in relation to something else.

According to inflationary theorists, truth like *being black* or *being white* is a property that refers to a **relational property** that belongs to propositions. Propositions have the property of *being true* while others have the property of *being false*, and they have these properties only when they are in a certain type of relation with something else.

2.1. Theory #2: Correspondence Theories

The first inflationary theory we will consider, and the most popular theory of truth, is known as the *correspondence theory of truth*. This theory contends the following:

Correspondence Account of Truth: Truth is a property that belongs to propositions and a proposition has the property of *being true* when it corresponding with (accurately representing, depicting, describing) the way the world is.

Correspondence theories take the notion of truth to be the **objective relation** between *words* and the *world*. We use language to expression propositions, which, we might say, are a representation (or description) of a *state of affairs* or the *world*. If the proposition is an accurate representation of the real world, then the proposition is true. If, however, the proposition is an inaccurate representation of the real world, then the proposition is false. The metaphor typically drawn to illustrate the correspondence theory of truth is

The first issue with the correspondence theory of truth is that while it appears to do an acceptable job of telling us what makes a proposition true, its account of falsity is problematic. Consider the following proposition:

(2) There are ten hippos dancing at the party.

According to the correspondence theory, (2) is true if and only if there are ten hippos dancing at the party, and what makes this proposition true is that the proposition represents a state of affairs that corresponds with an event in the actual world. But now suppose that (2) is false, i.e. it is not the case that ten hippos are dancing at the party. What event, state of affairs, or fact does this correspond to? You might say “one where hippos are not dancing at the party”, but what kind of situation is this? One issue that needs to be explained is that there seems to be a difference between the correspondence relation that makes a proposition true and the one that makes a proposition false.

The second issue with the correspondence theory is that the notion of “correspondence” itself is spooky. It was said that the notion of correspondence is an objective relation between words and the world where a situation represented by words accurately depicts what is going on in the world. But words and the world seem to be two different things. Written sentences like “snow is white” are spatial images, composed of ink or electronically produced on your computer, whereas *real snow reflecting light in a certain way in the real world* is a physical body with chemical properties. Since words and the world seem to be very different types of things, the challenge then for proponents of the correspondence theory of truth is to provide a more detailed account of the relation between words and the world.

2.2. Theory #3: Coherence Theories

A third theory of truth is known as the *coherence theory of truth*. This theory contends the following:

Coherence Account of Truth: Truth is a property that belongs to propositions and a proposition has the property of *being true* when it “coheres with” (is consistent with) a set of propositions.

Coherence theories take the notion of truth to a **relation** between *propositions* and *other propositions*. A proposition like “snow is white” is true not if and only if it corresponds to real state of affairs in the world where there is this thing *snow* and it has the property of *being white*. Rather, “snow is white” is true if and only if it is consistent with a variety of other propositions, such as *there is a thing called snow*, *there is a thing called “light”*, *light is a wave*, *light waves reflect off of the thing called snow and contact our eyes*, *the eye elicits a sensation called “white”*, and so on. The idea here is that a proposition is true not on its own, but only if it “coheres” or “fits” or is consistent with a set of propositions.

The central issue with the coherence theory of truth is that propositions can cohere with larger sets of propositions, but the entire set of propositions does not correspond with reality. For many, this is counter-intuitive because it disconnects the notion of truth from its relation to the actual world. To see this more clearly, consider the following set of propositions.

- (1) John is eating cookies.
- (2) Fred is eating cookies.
- (3) Someone broke the cookie jar.

In considering the truth or falsity of (3), we consider whether (3) coheres with the set of propositions that include (1), (2), and (3). Since there is nothing about the truth or falsity of (3) that would make it not fit with (1) and (2), we can say that (3) coheres with the set and so is true. This is a problem because the cookie jar might not be broken, and so, contrary to what the coherence theory of truth tells us, (3) is not true.

The coherentist might respond by saying that we typically do not evaluate the truth or falsity of propositions in such small sets like (1), (2), and (3). Rather, we ask whether (3) coheres against everything we know or take to be the case. The problem with this response is that some propositions seem to “fit” all (or most) of the data, but we would still reject them. Consider various conspiracy theories that the moon landings in 1969-1972 by NASA were faked. Conspiracy theorists take all of the propositions that most of all believe to be intuitively true (e.g. that there is a NASA, that there is video tape of moon landings, etc.), make some additional assumptions so that the proposition (e.g. NASA destroyed evidence of plans to fake the moon landing) and then argue that *the moon landings in 1969-1972 by NASA were faked* coheres within a larger set of propositions. Thus, the proposition *the moon landings in 1969-1972 by NASA were faked* coheres with a larger set of propositions, and so is *true*, but we would intuitively find this proposition to be *false*.

3. Theory #4: Deflationary Theories

A fourth theory of truth, and one of the most popular theories in the 20th century, is known as the *deflationary theory of truth*. This theory contends the following:

Deflationary Account of Truth: Truth is **not** a property that belongs to propositions; rather, to affirm that a sentence is true (“snow is white is true”) is just to affirm the sentence (“snow is white”).

Deflationary theories contend that when we affirm that a sentence is true, we are doing nothing more than *affirming* that sentence. To see this more clearly, it is helpful to consider a theory about language in ethics known as *emotivism*.

One way of understanding the meaning of “killing is morally wrong” is that this sentence expresses a proposition that says that the act of killing has the property of moral wrongness or *being wrong*. The proposition is true if and only if killing does have this property and false if it does not. What makes the phrase “morally wrong” meaningful is that it refers to a property that a thing might have. However, many people are philosophically skeptical about morality and are skeptical about whether there are properties like *being morally wrong* or *being good*. They contend that since there is no such property in the world as *being good* or *being evil*, when people say that “cutting in line is morally wrong (evil)” they are not actually referring to any real *being good property* that can be found in world. Nevertheless, we still have the intuition that sentences that have moral terms like “good”, “bad”, “wrong”, etc. are *meaningful*. So, the challenge to the emotivist theory of ethics is to show how skepticism about moral properties (e.g. *being good*) is compatible with the meaningfulness of moral language (e.g. “x is wrong”).

The emotivist attempts to meet this challenge in three steps. **First**, notice that not every meaningful sentence expresses a proposition. Consider the following sentences:

1. Pass me the salt.
2. Would you pass me the salt?
3. Hurray for salt!

Notice that #1 is a *command* and so is not something that can be true or false, #2 is a *question* and is not something that can be true or false, and #3 is an *exclamation* and is not something that can be true or false. Despite (1)-(3) not expressing a proposition, we nevertheless would say that (1)-(3) have meaning.

Second, some sentences have the *appearance* of expressing propositions (or of describing some facts) but do not really express propositions. Consider the following:

4. I bet five dollars (said as a poker player throws some chips toward the middle of the table)
5. There is the door (said in the context of a heated argument between two people)

Even though (4) is a declarative sentence and looks like it describes some fact about the world, saying that you *bet* five dollars is not describing some state of affairs about the world. Rather, it is but is *using* language to *do* something. In saying “I bet five dollars”, you are *betting five dollars* rather than describing what you are doing. In the case of (5), in saying “there is the door”, you are not pointing to and classifying an object as a door. That is, you are not stating some fact that is true if and only if the object you are pointed to (or looking at) is a door. Rather, in saying (5), you are *telling someone get out of the room, now!* To summarize, the second step of the emotivist argument is to point out that language is often *superficially descriptive* and so the literal interpretation of language can fail to express the “real meaning” of sentence. (4) and (5) are declarative sentences that share a similar syntax (grammar) as fact-stating sentences, but they are *not describing anything*, they are not referring to

some fact, and many would say that they are not expressing propositions (the type of thing that can be true or false).

The **third**, and final, step in the emotivist's argument is the claim that when we utter moral sentences, we aren't really expressing propositions (i.e., the type of thing that can be true or false). These sentences have the superficial appearance of expressing properties and referring to properties like *being good* or *being bad*. Rather, when we use a moral sentence like "killing is morally wrong," emotivists think that this *expresses* an emotion or attitude toward killing. What the descriptive-looking (proposition-looking) sentence actually expresses is something better captured by a non-proposition-expressing sentence. For example, when we utter the sentence "killing is morally wrong express" what this expresses is an emotion like *Killing, Yuck!* or *No to Killing!* Proposition-looking moral sentences thus mislead us to thinking there are moral properties like *being good*; such sentences are better interpreted as *exclamations* and moral terms are better interpreted as expressions of our attitudes towards certain actions.

Returning to the deflationary theories of truth, the deflationist says that sentences like "snow is white is true" mislead us into thinking that phrases like "is true" (truth) and "is false" (falsity) refer to the properties of *being true* and *being false*, respectively. Similar to how the emotivist argues that we should be skeptical about the reality of moral properties, the deflationary theorist says we should be skeptical about the property of being true or being false. Similar to how emotivists claim that ethical language deceives us into thinking there are properties like *being good* or *being evil*, deflationists claim that phrases like "is true" and "is false" deceive use into thinking that there are properties like *being true* or *being false*. Finally, similar to how the emotivist theory retains our intuition that moral sentences are nevertheless meaningful, the deflationary theory retains the meaningfulness of sentences that involve terms like "is true" or "is false."

Deflationary theories of truth have a number of explanations of how "is true" and "is false" can be meaningful but not refer to the properties of *being true* and *being true*. Here we focus a version of the deflationary theory called "expressiveness" (this view is closely related to the emotivist strategy). Compare the following two sentences said by Liz:

(1) Liz: "John was wearing a hat yesterday" is true.

(2) Liz: John was wearing a hat yesterday.

According to the deflationary theory when Liz utters (1), she is doing nothing more than *affirming* (2). That is, what gets expressed by the phrase "is true" is not the property of *being true* that is further explained as a correspondence or coherence relation; rather, "is true" in (1) does nothing more than indicate that the speaker of (1) is prepared to affirm (2).