

Truth as Correspondence

A truth is typically understood (in ordinary conversation) to be an idea or a sentence which is in some way 'correct' in what it says about its contents. If I truly think or say 'that's a forest' then somewhere nearby is an appropriate collection of trees. If we wish to define 'truth', or give a theory about it, an obvious strategy is to try to give a clearer account of this relationship, and the concept of 'correspondence' has been the most popular word to express how it should be understood. It is suggested that some sort of 'truth-bearer' has a relationship of 'correspondence' with a relevant 'fact'. The two main candidates for truth-bearing are either 'propositions' (either as abstract entities, or as entities within minds), or 'utterances', which are sentences given a precise meaning by some context. The two biggest challenges for developers of a correspondence theory of truth are to give plausible accounts of the correspondence relation, and of the concept of a 'fact'. The theory struggles if these are too vague.

If each truth-bearer was an atomic unity, and each fact was also an atomic unity, then all bearer/fact pairs would be joined by the one pure relationship (they just 'correspond'), and the correspondence theory would tell us nothing. Hence both the bearers and the facts need a structure, so that 'correspondence' between them means something. Utterances obviously have a structure, in the syntax, semantics and contexts of their sentences, and propositions must also have to be structured, perhaps reflecting the structure of the sentences normally used to express them (or perhaps the 'logical form' of those sentences). The minimum requirement for an utterance or proposition is a capacity to be 'true' (which isolated words seem to lack).

For a fact to have a structure it too requires components, ordered in some way. We normally take the components to be objects and properties (reflecting the subject-predicate form of our standard sentences), with relations giving their structure. If your metaphysics were different, and you felt that reality was composed of (say) processes or sense-data, then a different sort of structure must be discerned within your facts, to make meaningful correspondence possible. One proposal for a correspondence theory ('congruence') says that correspondence for truth is when a group of propertied objects are related in a certain directed way to compose a fact, and then the truth-bearer maps that fact as an expressive structure with the same components related in the same directed way. Hence truth is very like the relation between a good map and a landscape. A second proposal is that a truth-bearer 'pictures' the thing it describes, which allows more flexibility and subtlety in the relationship than the simpler mapping of objects and relations in the congruence theory.

Despite the intuitive attractiveness of the correspondence theory (which, for many people, survives all the criticism), it has become notorious for the range of problems which arise, once the theory is spelled out. A key question is whether 'congruence' or 'picturing' are adequate as illuminating accounts of the correspondence relation. The members of two string quartets can correspond quite well, because the eight entities have so much in common, but a forest is a collection of trees whereas the word 'forest' is a conventional noise we make, and a picture of a forest is small and can be two-dimensional. Vast amounts of information about the forest are missing in the truth-bearer, and the truth-bearers have features that are not present in forests. A further doubt is whether a good account of the correspondence would succeed in defining 'true', given that two string quartets have very good correspondence, but are not 'true' of one another. Two pictures of the same thing will probably correspond well to one another, but only be true of what they represent.

There can also be two very good maps of the same thing, so correspondence will undermine any optimistic claims that there is a unique set of perfect truths about the world. This may not bother us, but if one map is better than the other, then it corresponds better, but that suggests that correspondence (and thus truth) comes in degrees, and perfect correspondence, making a truth-bearer unequivocally 'true', would be rare or impossible.

This leads to the suspicion that there may be circularity or question-begging involved in the theory. If we say the world is full of correspondences, but only some of them are truths, we may need to know what truth is before we start articulating the theory, to pick out the right ones. A further charge of circularity is made when it comes to facts. If we observe a forest in a landscape, we may think we are observing a fact, but to pick the forest out from the landscape we need to say what the fact is. But then we are in trouble, because the best way to pick out the fact is to say 'that's a forest' (perhaps adding a hand gesture). This reduces our prized correspondence theory to a tautology, because we have to say 'that's a forest' corresponds to 'that's a forest'. We need some way to single out facts, but many people would define a fact as simply 'a true sentence', which makes the correspondence theory impossible. We could try individuating the fact about the forest with a perception and a hand gesture, and perhaps the word 'that', but this is worryingly vague. If my fact is a part of the forest where the trees are more sparse, shorter, and looking unhealthy, hand-waving will need the support of precise language.

The word 'fact' is particularly favoured by metaphysical realists, who take the facts to be how the world is, independent of the thoughts of any minds about it. A realist can just say there is such an independent way for the world to be, but breaking this reality down into facts is obviously tricky. You can't just combine all the facts to get reality, because facts overlap, vary in size, and can be widely distributed across time and space. We say things like 'there's no one here – and that's a fact!', and there are abstract and general facts.

The congruence or picture views usually rely on truths about the physical world, but correspondence looks even more elusive for necessary truths, for analytic truths, for universal generalisations, for negative truths, for conditional or modal truths, and for truths about the past or future. Defenders of the theory have to give some indication of how our thoughts can correspond to such vague, vast or highly abstract facts. Truth as correspondence is not necessarily realist (because correspondence could be entirely between mental events), but it is realists who fight to retain the theory. The pursuit of 'rigour' in analytic philosophy works against the theory, and semantic, minimalist or axiomatic theories are preferred. Sceptics about the theory switch to pragmatism, or give up on truth entirely.