

Pragmatic Truth

Many people, over a long period, have expressed a passionate commitment either to some particular truth, or to the general idea of the supremacy of truth as a value, even occasionally spelling it in English with a capital 'T' – the Truth. An Enlightenment mantra was that beauty, goodness and truth were the supreme ideals of human life. Even when ancient and modern sceptics doubted whether we could fully grasp what was true, or provide a justification for it, not many philosophers actually rejected the idea of truth. It is only the relativists who doubt whether our beliefs can ever genuinely said to be true. It may be the rise of early modern empiricist philosophy that changed this situation. Rationalists usually hold mathematics up as a model for knowledge, and the beautifully clarity and apparent indisputability of mathematical truths gives a feeling of security to the very concept that something is just 'true'. Experience, on the other hand, even at its most convincing, doesn't offer such confidence, either in our ability to know things, or in our conviction that there is something out there to be known. We are confident of our beliefs, and we may be confident of the evidence which supports them, but we have no experience of some nebulous thing called 'truth'. Could we not get by without it, in a sensible philosophy?

Pragmatism offers a strategy for bringing truth down to earth, within our experiences, without (it is hoped) having to entirely abandon it. If rationalism and idealism make truth a remote and abstract concept, then explaining its essential nature seems almost impossible, so pragmatists start by examining the role which truth has in ordinary living. It is quickly seen that the concept of truth is what guides our actions. Throughout our days, we simply track what we take to be true, and avoid what we take to be false. We can then divide these 'actions' into theory and practice. Truth is the guide for our behaviour, and it is our guide in all scientific research.

If we then ask how we recognise what is taken to be true in these two situations, we find that in practice truth is a necessary condition for a decision to act, and in theory truth is the hallmark of statements which can be asserted. Of course, one person may act against the will of some companions, and a researcher may assert something which is not accepted by the team. This introduces a social dimension to the concept of truth, and we see that we are approaching what we mean by 'true' when there is a consensus.

At this point we hit the obvious problem of relativism. History is littered with notorious examples of groups who reached a consensus which we now see to be quite wrong. The response of some pragmatists at this point is to embrace the relativism, treat truth as whatever local standard guides actions and assertions, and give up on actually 'getting it right', and thus giving up on realism about the world. A number of modern pragmatists are anti-realists and relativists of this sort (and are fairly unpopular with their opponents).

An alternative route is to embrace realism about the external world, which thus exists in a particular and determinate way. We can then say that our actions and assertions are intended to accurately respond to this world. If we then said that "accurately" was the key word, we would embrace something like the correspondence theory of truth, and give up pragmatism, so there needs to be a pragmatic concept of accuracy. We must include the idea of 'success', in actions and assertions. Accurate beliefs can be defined as those which continually lead to success in action, and accurate assertions will continually lead to successful theories. To be thoroughly pragmatic, we can then define successful theories as those that lead to successful actions (such as a powerful technology arising from a theory in physics). It may be difficult to specify what 'successful action' looks like, because diverse cultural values will enter into it, but it might be simply characterised as satisfying widespread desires.

This realist route will not entirely avoid relativism, because a local consensus may lead to local short-term success, but eventually start to go wrong. Even now, our whole collection of successful beliefs and assertions may turn out to have been wrong. A possible response from pragmatists is to define truth not as actual consensus, but as what believers and asserters aim to achieve. Thus our current lives and researches are all aimed at long-term sustained success, and so we can be 'fallibilists', acting on what we take to be true, while admitting that we may be wrong. 'Wrong' will cash out as some sort of future failure in theory or practice.

Switching from actual consensus to ultimate consensus introduces an idealist element which pragmatists had hoped to avoid, but the picture can still be expressed in the pragmatic framework of successful action. Pragmatists take an assertion to be about consequences, and to implicitly endorse some real evidence for it. It is the underlying realism (of this form of pragmatism) which keeps the theory within the grasp of experience and common sense. It is obvious that successful theory and action will achieve their success because they engage with the world as it is, and that failure will result if our evidence loses touch with this reality. We steer through the rocks of reality with our asserted truths as our pilot; if we get through, they were true, and if we don't, the rocks will reveal how they were wrong.

It is in this sense that we should understand the pragmatist slogan that "the truth is what works". Critics decry this idea because it is obvious that falsehoods can work extremely well in some situations (such as telling your team they can win, when you don't really believe it). The pragmatist theory of truth does not work well for single isolated sentences, which may or may not 'work' for all sorts of reasons, but that is not how the theory should be understood. It is not an accident that pragmatists tend to embrace 'holistic' views of language and scientific theories, because it is success in the broadest sense which shows truth to be a practical concept.

Success in one sphere of action (nursing) may look quite different from success in another (warfare), and success in theoretical economics and astronomy seem quite different. Hence the pragmatist has the dilemma of whether to be a monist or a pluralist about truth. That is, can we give a single pragmatic account of truth for all of these diverse areas, or must truth fragment into successes in very diverse situations? The pluralist view invites a new form of relativism (as relative to an enquiry, rather than to a person or culture). If truth is expressed in terms of success, then one option is to drop 'true' from our vocabulary, but realist pragmatism offers real insights into our familiar concept.