

## ***The Politics of (Post) Truth***

### **Theories of Truth in Contemporary Philosophy**

The following is a brief introduction to the four predominant theories of truth in contemporary philosophy. Whilst no knowledge of philosophy is either assumed or necessary for the conference, we thought participants might find some introduction to contemporary debates interesting as background to the conference. Please consider what follows as supplementary information to the discussion at the *Politics of (Post) Truth*; it is not pre-requisite reading for the philosophy panel, and the panelists will not refer to this introduction. We hope that you find it stimulating and helpful. For any further information, please contact Chris at [C.M.Henry@kent.ac.uk](mailto:C.M.Henry@kent.ac.uk).

### **Introduction**

As Misak argues in *Truth, Politics, Morality*, ‘the notion of truth has fallen from grace’ (Misak 2002: 1). In various forms of mid-20th century critical thought, truthful political philosophy became the target of a political philosophy of truth. This critique was an attempt to unmask and dismiss theories of truth as upholding and reinforcing the forms of logic that themselves upheld social institutions, with the assumption that these logics benefitted the institutions over the citizens they were created to serve. Certainly, and whether one accepts the position that critical theory adopted or not, the current period of post-truth politics is (in part) constituted by a wholesale rejection of the very idea that individuals and institutions might present ideas that are grounded upon a form of truth. So why might one wish to hold onto the concept of truth? Misak puts it well and it is worth quoting her at length:

‘We think that it is appropriate, or even required, that we give reasons and arguments for our beliefs, that “rational” persuasion, not brow-beating or force, is the appropriate means of getting someone to agree with us. Indeed, we want people to *agree* with, or at least respect, our judgements, as opposed to merely mouthing them, or falling in line with them. And we criticise the beliefs, actions, and even the final ends and desires of others, as false, vicious, immoral, or irrational. The fact that our moral judgements come under such internal

discipline is a mark of their objectivity. The above phenomena are indications that moral inquiry aims at truth' (2002: 3).

Generally speaking then, truth claims form the weight of political argumentation, and theories of truth are often used to ground claims in a certain sense of 'reality'; when thinking either politics or the political, truth claims tread a thin line between a reductively dogmatic world-view and qualified political claims that ground their authority in a theory of their truthful relationship to the world. However, this 'consequentialist' justification for truth as a legitimisation for (often coercive) political claims—'because it is true that immigration leads to social unrest, and it is true that social unrest is undesirable, we must develop a policy to reduce immigration'—is challenged by both critical and liberal theorists alike. For liberal universalists, who deny the ability to make consequentialist truth claims, institutions of the state must take a neutral stance, allowing the individual to develop their own *relative* conceptualisation of truth. Of course, this attempt at preventing the coercion of a partial system of truths itself institutes a false neutrality: for example, the French ban of the traditional Muslim headscarf (*foulard*) is not a 'neutral' decision, but is grounded upon a republican conceptualisation of the public sphere from which obvious distinction is intolerable.

So, whilst suspicious critical theorists and those who Misak calls 'hands-off' liberals may wish to push to the side conceptualisations of truth (at the very least), the truth claims implicit in such wariness nevertheless constitute some of the imperative to engage with it. The rest of this introduction will outline—very generally—three dominant theories of truth, as well as the lesser known *aletheiatic* theory of truth, which might prove helpful as an introduction to the conference.<sup>1</sup>

## Theories of Truth

If, as Burgess and Burgess claim, the best-known definition of truth by a philosopher is Aristotle's assertion that '[t]o say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true' (Aristotle 1981:

---

<sup>1</sup> The fourth dominant theory of truth—deflationism—will not be explicated here. Deflationism differs from the other three theories by arguing that truth is not a property of ontology, epistemology, or the truth-teller. Instead, for deflationists, truthful propositions affirm the power of language itself (Armour-Garb and Beall 2005: 2). This theory is not developed herein as it does not have a significant part to play in contemporary political philosophy.

1011b25), then we are left with a nominal definition of truth that does not help appear to be helpful (Burgess and Burgess 2011: 2). Following Aristotle, contemporary authorship on the concept of truth generally divides between those who offer a definition of truth (correspondence theorists), and nominalists who explain what it means to call something true (coherence theorists). There is another group of thinkers (pragmatists) however who describe a belief as true if it is *useful* in practice (as opposed to it being defined more substantially), as well as deflationists who disagree with the above three ‘substantialist’ theories, who argue that ‘there is nothing more to the meaning of the truth predicate than what enables it to serve certain logical functions in language’ (Schmitt 2004: 28). Deflationists argue that truth talk is expressive and affirms the power of language itself. Thus, although there are considerable differences within each, there are four general theories of truth: coherence, correspondence, pragmatic and deflationary theories.

These four theories, however, only constitute the most dominant theories - and particularly only those of the (predominantly) analytic tradition. Derrida differentiates between two kinds of truth theories, distinguishing between ‘mimetic’ truth and ‘aletheia’. According to Payne, Derrida thought that ‘[t]ruth as mimesis assumes the unproblematic stability of language as an instrument with which to render or represent the world, and as such mimesis carries a deep suspicion of literature. Mimetic truth-seekers are highly anxious about the capacity of language to “mean so many different things”’ (Payne 2000: 132). Criticising the assumptions of philosophy’s ‘linguistic turn’—i.e. that both truth and meaning are made coherent by the rules of language itself—both Derrida and Foucault (following Heidegger) developed theories of truth as *aletheia*, or ‘without concealment’ (2000: 130). This theory of truth will be developed more below.

## Correspondence theory

In the *Discourse on Metaphysics*, Leibniz assured his reader that ‘it is agreed that every true prediction has some basis in the nature of things’ (Leibniz 2005: § 8), providing correspondence theory with a clear understanding of where truth is to be found. Understanding that the identification of a certain thing as truly a certain thing may run the risk of nominalism, Leibniz looked for a way to ground the truth of identification in nature. Correspondence theorists therefore, whose key proponents alongside Leibniz include Russell and Wittgenstein, are usually committed to a ‘metaphysical realism’ in the sense that,

as Alston puts it, ‘truth has to do with the relation of a potential truth bearer [i.e. a person] to a reality beyond itself’ (Alston 1996: 8). Truth, according to these claims, must be independent of epistemological concepts (such as verification and ratification) and instead be an ontological property to which statements (variously in the form of propositions, statements, beliefs or ideas) may or may not correspond or represent.

One of the most robust correspondence theories of truth was that put forward by Bertrand Russell in his essay ‘On the Nature of Truth and Falsehood’ (Russell 1910). Russell claimed that we may ‘state the difference between truth and falsehood as follows: Every judgement is a relation of the mind to several objects, one of which is a relation; the judgement is true when the relation which is one of the objects relates the other objects otherwise it is false’ (1910: 155-56). Acknowledging later that this definition suffers from the ‘direction problem’—i.e. it does not specify whether a relation goes between A to B, or vice versa—Russell added that ‘the relation must not be abstractly before the mind, but must be before it as proceeding from A to B rather than from B to A. [...] Then the relation as it enters into the judgement must have a ‘sense’, and in the corresponding complex it must have the same sense’ (Russell 2001 [1912]: 198-99; Newman 2002: 92-93). Russell’s theory (in its mature form) does not assume that people are in relation to certain facts (an assumption he held in his earlier work), but that ‘a person is in a relation to certain objects that could be components of a fact’ (Newman 2002: 91). Put simply then, for correspondent theorists, facts are not independent of the mind, and the mind exercises on the world in order to create facts of it.

## Coherence theory

There are three criticisms that face correspondence theory. Firstly, as Burgess and Burgess argue, there is an overriding problem with correspondence theories in that ‘they add nothing but rhetoric to the deflationist account on which it is true that things are some way iff things are that way’ (Burgess and Burgess 2011: 71).<sup>2</sup> This criticism plays on the assumption that the mind thinking truth is assumed to be related to the world of which it thinks. A formal separation between the mind and the world (according to which the individual perceives a world that is entirely independent of them), for Burgess and Burgess, means that what is true is simply an apparent description of the world. Secondly, there is an

---

<sup>2</sup> ‘iff’ is used here as a shorthand for ‘if and only if’.

infinite regress into the authority claim that the subject uses to 'claim' the truth of a situation. When the subject declares that their belief is true because they relate truthfully to the world, this declaration uses a truth claim that itself requires a source of authority to assert its truth. Without employing a tautology, it is unclear where this authority is to be found.<sup>3</sup> Thirdly, it is not clear to what part of reality 'hypothetical' or existentially ambiguous beliefs are supposed to relate to: it is clear what the sentence 'the snow is white' might relate to, but what about 'the unicorn is white'? It might be objected that the fact that unicorns do not exist nullifies this problem, but this negative claim to truth (i.e. the non-existence of unicorns) cannot itself be shown to be true.

As Newman puts it, '[a]lthough nominalists must admit that we speak truthfully about property possession, about particulars having something in common, and about particulars being the same in a certain respect, they regard them merely as related ways of speaking that are not to be taken literally. They deny the literal existence of the things affirmed to exist by realists' (Newman 2002: 15-16). Such theorists disavow the ontological certainty that truth claims definitely relate to the world (this is what is known as anti-realism, or at least contra-realism) and instead focus on what it is to tell truth. Coherence theory emerged in the 19th century, drawing inspiration from Spinoza and Hegel, and was at its most developed in the work of H. H. Joachim, F. H. Bradley, and Brand Blanshard in the early twentieth century (Schmitt 2004: 11).

According to Schmitt, the case to be made for the coherence theory is as follows:

'Judgement that, and knowledge of whether, a given judgement is true must evidently result from a comparison of the target judgement with other judgements. The object of such a comparison must be a relation among judgements. Yet the object of the comparison is truth. So truth is a relation among judgements. [...] So [...] truth is membership in a coherent system of judgements' (Schmitt 2004: 12).

For coherence theorists then, truth is not an ontological property but an epistemological relation; it functions as a judgement that governs the veracity of other beliefs to the extent that they function properly with other beliefs that the subject holds. It may well be, therefore, legitimate to talk of the truth of unicorns if one has good reason to

---

<sup>3</sup> Gödel's work following that of Russell on the formal systems 'appeared to demonstrate the impossibility of any formalisation of mathematical reasoning that combines both completeness (in its ability to capture all of the truths of mathematics) and logical consistency' (Livingston 2011: 25). Put simply, this is another way of saying that the authority of a given system is either non-existent, or illegitimate. When applied to linguistics, this conclusion negates the assumed authority of the subject as truth-teller. See also (Schmitt 2004: 11).

believe in their existence; as long as the idea ‘unicorn’ functions properly within the speaker’s epistemological structure, it holds a claim for truth. It is this form of reasoning that posits the existence of dark matter, and supported the kindling of quantum theory.

Blanshard’s criticism of Hume’s concept of causality acts as a clear advocate of the coherence theory: according to Blanshard, when ‘we see a hammer about to descend on a nail, and say it will cause the nail to sink in, we seem to be thinking not merely of hammer and nail, but of something distinct from either, a peculiar connection between them’ (Blanshard 1939: 267). Whereas, for Blanshard, Hume’s inability to ‘know’ the relation between the hammer and nail forced him to explain it away merely as a product of ‘habit produced by experience’ (1939: 267), in fact the existence of this relation constituted an epistemic object that needed to be accounted for. Once saved from Hume’s desire to explain it away, for Blanshard, causality as a relation ‘must now be detached from the first pair of terms and transferred to another case’ in order to establish its clear and explicit status as a truth (1939: 268).

It is not certain however that coherence theorists can be as assured of their criticism of correspondence theory as they may like to think. Indeed, when Blanshard says of correspondence theory that the ‘scepticism entailed by the theory is so profound as to be incompatible with any confidence in its own truth’ (Blanshard 1939: 271), he hints at a similar weakness that plagues coherence theory: by disavowing the ontological foundations of truth claims, what is to stop those with entirely non-sensical beliefs—those suffering from delusional mental health disorders, for example—from claiming that these beliefs are nevertheless true? In other words, although one might argue that the statement ‘unicorns are white’ is true—because unicorns and white-ness are both properties that function in the subject’s system of beliefs—this does not legitimise any claim about the *ontological* without further description of each property. Yet, each further claim to populate the idea of ‘unicorn’ with properties falls to the same hurdle, i.e. the truth speaker can never specify their idea sufficiently enough to ‘match’ an ontological object and so the same criticism that nominalists raise against the false authority of realists can be levied—albeit inverted—back at them.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> See (Newman 2002: 16-17) for a development of this criticism.

## Pragmatism

Although Toumlin urges the reader to distinguish Dewey from other pragmatists on account of his filiation with Wittgenstein and Heidegger (Dewey 1981 introduction), Dewey joins the ranks of Charles Sanders Pierce, William James and Richard Rorty as one of the most influential thinkers of pragmatism. Often characterised as the founder of pragmatic truth theory, Pierce laments the profusion of unclear ideas that hinder the individual's ability to act in the world: 'It is terrible to see how a single unclear idea, a single formula without meaning, lurking in a young man's head, will sometimes act like an obstruction of inert matter in an artery, hindering the nutrition of the brain, and condemning its victim to pine away in the fullness of his intellectual vigour and in the midst of intellectual plenty' (Pierce 2004: 44). Less concerned with the ontological and epistemological foundations of truth than either correspondence or coherence theorists (with the exception of Rorty, who engages with poststructuralist metaphysics), pragmatists are associated with the claim that 'a true belief is one which would be agreed upon at the hypothetical or ideal end of inquiry' (Misak 2002: 1). Thus, as Misak continues, pragmatism 'abandons the kind of metaphysics which is currently in so much disrepute – it abandons concepts which pretend to transcend experience. Truth and objectivity are matters of what is best for the community of inquirers to believe, "best" here amounting to that which best fits with the evidence and argument' (2002: 1). This is why Pierce is interested in establishing clear ideas, for it is only through clear ideas that individuals can best live their lives within a community of individuals who are likewise interested in furthering themselves. As James' dedication of *Pragmatism* (1975 [1907]) to John Stuart Mill shows, pragmatism has its roots in Mill's concept of genius - the becoming of which is a precursor to making good decisions about one's life.

Whilst this introduction will not develop pragmatism any further, it is necessary to highlight that, whilst correspondence theorists replace the priority of epistemology in favour of ontological with their theories, and vice versa for coherence theorists, pragmatists can be ambiguous with regards to both. Whilst Pierce, setting himself at odds with Blanshard, takes up Hume's mantle when he states that 'the whole function of thought is to produce habits of action' (Pierce 2004: 47), for Rorty, all the mind is is the production of practical ways for living life and, hence, truth is simply 'what passes for good belief' (Misak 2002: 13). Given that, for Rorty, any foundational claim based upon either ontology or epistemology is illegitimate, the only thing one can advocate is for what he calls 'ironic liberalism' as a way of asserting oneself whilst avoiding ethnocentric biases. Only by declaring one's identity as

amongst other ‘twentieth-century Western social democrats’ (Rorty 1991: 214)—and living in a constant self-critical relation to this declaration—does Rorty argue one can avoid fixing thought too rigidly in Western, liberal democratic values. Yet, if this is the case, Christopher Norris warns that ‘we have reached a point where theory has effectively turned against itself, generating a form of extreme epistemological scepticism which reduces everything – philosophy, politics, criticism and “theory” alike – to a dead level of suasive or rhetorical effect where consensus-values are the last (indeed the only) court of appeal’ (Norris 1990: 4). How then can pragmatists, whilst holding onto an anti-foundational set of assertions, nevertheless make definite claims about the world, or even assert the correctness of their own theories? Pragmatism seems to rely on conviction as underpinning their arguments, and it is hard to see how such a concept used so nakedly might form part of a convincing position.

## Aletheia

Aletheiatic theories of truth, as Foucault has argued, are not mentioned explicitly in ancient philosophies, but can be found to be implicit within the plays of Euripides and Sophocles (Foucault 1983, 2014). Tracing a genealogy from ancient Greece, through to St. Paul and the early Christian monastic traditions, towards a revised form within the Catholic system of penance, Foucault developed a practice of aletheiatic truth telling in his own work as ‘*parrhesia*’ (Foucault 1983). For Foucault, *parrhesia* ‘was not a question of analysing the internal or external criteria that would enable the Greeks and Romans, or anyone else, to recognise whether a statement or proposition is true or not. At issue [...] was rather the attempt to consider truth-telling as a specific activity, or as a role’ (Foucault 1983: concluding remarks). Parrhesiatic thought is, for Foucault, not quite the affirmation of what has been said, but the ability of the individual to affirm *themselves* as some who can tell *their own* truth. An inquiry into the self and, concomitantly, the individual’s ability to tell the truth of the world as it appears to them is therefore also in line with the pragmatic tradition of inquiry. Telling the truth of oneself, for Foucault, has a transformative effect upon the subject and reveals new, previously unthinkable, ways of living. For this reason, Foucault’s work fits within the aletheiatic tradition: ethical ways of living are revealed to the individual by their own work on themselves.



A second influential theorist whose work on aletheiatic truth draws on St. Paul is Alain Badiou, a prominent contemporary post-Maoist, whose importance lies in his articulation of mathematics as the language of ‘being *qua* being’ (Badiou 2004: 49). Arguing that ‘[o]ne of the core demands of contemporary thought is to have done with “political philosophy”’ (Badiou 2005: 10), Badiou argues that certain political events rupture with the current (political) order and how we know the world. This reveals the possibility for ‘militants’ (in his terms), who hold fidelity to the event, to bring about the event’s consequences in what is, for Badiou, a political ‘truth procedure’.<sup>5</sup> The ability for militants to articulate new political truths and negate standard political philosophy (a category that includes all forms of philosophy other than Badiou’s, as well as all moral and ethical theory) is based upon mathematical set theory, in the version drawn up by Zermelo and Fraenkel in the 1920s. According to Badiou’s interpretation of set theory, attempts on the part of an individual or an institution to *make* everything fit into a set of categories—by a state government, for example, in a census—is illegitimate, as it pre-figures the many different ways that individuals can exist. This is demonstrated when, in Badiou’s example, a long-lost cousin knocks at the door and declares themselves part of the family, invalidating the census. Categorisation can, and for Badiou *must*, be resisted when a particular event reveals the possibility to do so, in a practice in which the individual acts out the truth of this event for them.

It is clear that the aletheiatic tradition has a radically different understanding of the relationship between ontology and epistemology than the traditional theories of truth.<sup>6</sup> The most significant difference between these and the traditional theories of truth is the reliance that aletheiatic thinkers place upon the aleatory, or ruptural, nature of events. Indeed, aletheiatic philosophy distinguishes itself upon the indescribability of emergent events, in the sense that significant events in our lives (job interviews, deaths, engagements, revolutions, et cetera), often wash over us and leave us to pick up the pieces in their wake. New meaning is *created* either as addition to (Foucault and Derrida), or as subtraction from (Heidegger and Badiou) events. This distinction is in sharp contrast with the correspondence and coherence theories, which both profess to speak the truth of an already-existent world. The aletheiatic relationship with both pragmatic theories however is less distinct and there is clearly productive work to be done in this field of study. For example, what is the nature of truth-

<sup>5</sup> There are four types of truth procedure for Badiou: those of politics, art, science and love. The political truth procedure has been outlined here only for the sake of brevity.

<sup>6</sup> An excellent summation of the relationship between Badiou, Foucault and Derrida in this respect can be found in (Balibar 2002).

claims about a world that has not yet come into being. This might be a particularly important consideration when constructing a world post-(Post) Truth. How can one talk of a world-to-come using language from within a world that must—necessarily—be negated?

Whilst this introduction cannot approximate the detail and importance of the concept that is advocated by those working on the field, it is hoped that at least it is interesting, and provides a useful backdrop for discussion at the conference.

**Dr Chris Henry**

Associate Lecturer in Politics, University of Kent

[C.M.Henry@kent.ac.uk](mailto:C.M.Henry@kent.ac.uk)

## Want to know more?

- Alston, William P. 1996. *A Realist Conception of Truth* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca).
- Aristotle. 1981. *Metaphysics* (Clarendon: Oxford).
- Armour-Garb, Bradley P, and JC Beall. 2005. *Deflationary Truth* (Open Court Publishing: Chicago and La Salle).
- Badiou, Alain. 2004. *Theoretical Writings* (Continuum: London and New York).  
———. 2005. *Metapolitics* (Verso: London and New York).
- Balibar, Etienne. 2002. 'The History of Truth': Alain Badiou in French Philosophy', *Radical Philosophy*: 16-28.
- Blanshard, Brand. 1939. *The Nature of Thought* (G. Allen & Unwin Ltd: London).
- Burgess, Alexis G., and John P. Burgess. 2011. *Truth* (Princeton University Press: Princeton and Woodstock).
- Dewey, J. 1981. *The Later Works, 1925-53* (Southern Illinois University Press: Carbondale).
- Foucault, Michel. 1983. "Discourse and Truth: the Problematisation of Parrhesia." In, edited by J. Pearson. University of California at Berkeley: Northwestern University.  
———. 2014. *On The Government of the Living: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1979-1980* (Palgrave Macmillan: London and New York).
- James, William. 1975 [1907]. *Pragmatism: a New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge and London).
- Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm. 2005. *Discourse on Metaphysics and the Monadology* (Dover Publications: Mineola, New York).
- Livingston, Paul M. 2011. *The Politics of Logic: Badiou, Wittgenstein, and the Consequences of Formalism* (Routledge: London and New York).
- Misak, Cheryl. 2002. *Truth, Politics, Morality: Pragmatism and Deliberation* (Routledge: London and New York).
- Newman, Andrew. 2002. *The Correspondence Theory of Truth: An Essay on the Metaphysics of Predication* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge).
- Norris, Christopher. 1990. *What's Wrong with Postmodernism: Critical Theory and the Ends of Philosophy* (Harvester Wheatsheaf: New York).
- Payne, Michael. 2000. 'The Survival of Truth After Derrida', *Journal for Cultural Research*, 4: 127-34.

Pierce, Charles Sanders. 2004. 'How to Make Our Ideas Clear.' in Frederick F. Schmitt (ed.), *Theories of Truth* (Blackwell: Malden, Oxford and Carlton).

Rorty, Richard. 1991. 'Feminism and Pragmatism', *Michigan Quarterly Review*: 231-58.

Russell, Bertrand. 1910. 'On the Nature of Truth and Falsehood.' in Bertrand Russell (ed.), *Philosophical Essays* (Longmans, Green: London).

———. 2001 [1912]. *The Problems of Philosophy* (Oxford University Press: Oxford).

Schmitt, Frederick F. 2004. *Theories of Truth* (Blackwell: Malden, Oxford and Carlton).