
UNIT.4. THEORIES OF TRUTH AND ERROR: WESTERN

Contents

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 The Correspondence Theory
- 4.3 The Pragmatic Theory
- 4.4 The Coherence Theory
- 4.5 The Performative theory
- 4.6 Truth and Error
- 4.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.8 Key Words
- 4.9 Further Readings and References

4.0 OBJECTIVES

- To familiarize the students with the four main theories of truth from Eastern and Western perspectives.
- To encourage them to question the sources of truth and error in knowledge.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

How do I know? Can I be sure of the various ways of acquiring knowledge? How is error related to truth? In this unit we see mainly the different classical theories of truth and reflect on them philosophically. We take only four main theories of truth as given in Western Philosophy and give a critical account of them, where we introduce some related Indian concepts too.

4.2 THE CORRESPONDENCE THEORY

This theory says that truth is “the adequation of the mind to the object”. In other words truth is the correspondence itself between what I affirm or deny to what is really the case. This has been our provisional understanding of ‘truth’. The majority of Indian schools of Philosophy agree that ‘*Prama*’, knowledge, must correspond to what really the object of knowledge is in itself. Some, however, raise the question: how can I know that what I can affirm or deny really corresponds to what the case is? In other words, how can I know that the object as known corresponds to the object as it is in itself? For if I have to turn my attention to this very ‘correspondence’ I would still know it as known, but would it, in its turn, correspond to what it is in itself? And so on and so forth ad infinitum! I cannot jump out of my mind, as it were, so as to be able to ‘compare’ what I know and the object of my knowledge as it is in itself and thus to see whether they correspond to each other or not.

Kant holds that we do not need to worry, since we can never know the object as it is in itself (*noumenon*), for this remains always unknown and unknowable; we can only know the object as known (*phenomenon*), as it appears to you and moulded by certain forms of your mind (categories). The scholastics say: Don’t worry, you do know the object as it is in itself; in fact the object as known is really a kind of ‘sign in which’ (*signum quo*) not the image of the object as it is in itself is known, but directly the object itself. On this particular topic, the Indian schools of philosophy are also divided. Two main trends appear: one says that truth is ‘self-validating’ (*svatah-Pramanyavada*), the other says that truth has to be validated by something other than

itself (*paratah-Pramanyvada*). We do not intend to enter into the details of these two trends. (The former is best represented by Samkhya, Mimamsa and Vedanta, the later by the Nyaya-Vaisesika).

But the way we understand 'correspondence' is to see in it the 'definition' of what we mean by 'truth' and not as some modern commentators of Nyaya, for example, as a 'test' of 'truth'. We make use of the 'test' or 'proof' to see whether the judgment (all propositions) is true or false. If I manage to obtain sufficient and necessary 'evidence', then I know that the judgement is true otherwise I may either still be doubtful, or if the evidence is sufficient and necessary that my judgment is false, I know that it is false. But then, supposing that I know fully know that my judgment is true, I do not need to have 'test' the already established 'truth' of my judgment by some other non-cognitive means (e.g. by its usefulness). If I do still feel the need to have further tests, it means that I am still doubtful about whether my judgment is true or false. And if I simply want to show why (not whether!) my judgment is true, then I have to initiate a process of reasoning which I can come to see finally rests not on any non-cognitive consideration (e.g. usefulness) but on some 'self-evident' truth.

Still some fail to disentangle themselves from the difficulty regarding the possibility of ascertaining whether the 'correspondence' is itself true or false, or simply whether it is true at all. (For it may happen that I may not be able to see that it is false, and yet I may not be able to see that it is true either). So they seek to find some other meaning of 'truth'. The epistemological difficulty leads them to solve the semantic question differently. Notice already the two semantic and metaphysical questions getting involved with each other.

Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer

1. How does correspondence theory of truth understand truth?

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2. What do the Indian schools speak in general of the correspondence theory of truth?

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4.3 THE PRAGMATIC THEORY

Pragmatism (from Greek '*pragma*', deed) is that doctrine, or trend of thought, according to which the value of an assertion lies solely in its practical bearing upon human interests. In this sense, it can also be called utilitarianism (from Latin '*utilis*', useful). So concretely, suppose I asked whether it is true that fire heats, the pragmatists would answer: well, if you put water or

food on it, will it heat or not? The answer is definitely yes. So, according to the pragmatists, all you need to know to see whether what you are saying is true or false is whether it serves you a good purpose. If it does, it is true; if it does not, it is 'useful'. Or more precisely still, the question whether "fire heats" corresponds to objective facts or not is either considered as impossible to ascertain or as use-less. At first sight, this may seem a very attractive (and practical!) idea, if universally applied it can do have disastrous consequences not only in the realm of Philosophy but and especially in that of Religion, as we are going to see. Still, a lot can be learnt from such a trend of thought.

In the West, best known for pursuing such a trend of thought are C.S. Peirce (the "Father of modern pragmatism" and the coiner of the term), J. Dewey (calling his Philosophy "instrumentalism") and William James. C S Peirce, a scientist and logician, applied his theory mostly to scientific assertions (and also ethics). If a proposition yields results in the field of scientific enquiry and as such is accepted by the scientific community, that proposition is true. J.Dewey applies his doctrine not only to scientific assertions, and thus to the formation of a scientific theory, but also to all assertions we use in the solution of everyday problems. If our solutions are useful and if our theories by which we try to reconstruct the ever-changing flow of life are verified by life itself, our solutions and theories can be called true. William James speaks more in terms of 'meaning' or 'view' of life. If an assertion, and the view of life which is thus made up of such assertions, function satisfactorily in my life, if, in other words, it gives meaning and purpose to my life, then that assertion and view of life are true. Of course they may be 'true' to me and not to you. James applies this also to religious propositions expressive of religious beliefs. And in this he is followed by others more recent thinkers of whom we shall speak later in a related but different context.

A lot can be learnt from an epistemological pragmatic approach to 'truth'. We can speak of the value of a 'working hypothesis' in scientific enquiry. Not only that but, as we point out too, of the set of hypotheses which make up a theory – and this too in religious knowledge – one cannot really ask whether they are true or false but whether they are appropriate or inappropriate, arbitrary or well-grounded, reasonable or not. Till, of course, reasons ultimately founded on some self-evident truth, do not provide sufficient evidence to prove them true or false, they are to be considered 'true' in this pragmatic sense. 'Truth' is here understood, rightly, as 'usefulness'.

Reality, after all – from the smallest atom to the highest 'God' – is so mysterious, at times so puzzling, that we have to be humble enough to admit that in most things we know things only "in so far" as we can and in accordance with our limited capacity of known. This approach far from being a skeptic one, or purely a subjectivistic one, equips one with a certain oneness to ever-present but ever-eluding Truth. As St. Augustine says, "We look to find, we find to look again". Much of our knowledge of reality is a 'construction' of it in such a way as to make it intelligible to us, but in such a way too that remains always provisional, hypothetical.

And this is particularly true when from the level of 'facts' we pass on to the level of their 'significance'. That there is a somebody in front of me is a fact, and it is a fact too that she is of such and such description. But is it a fact that "she is the most beautiful girl in the world"? Is this a "propositional judgment" subject to be proved true or false? If not, is it not 'true' to anybody, including to her passionate lover? If it is 'true' to him, what is meant by 'true' here? Does it not mean 'significant'? Take such other judgments: "my work is my life", "my family is my world",

love is my breath”, “humanity is a community”, “history has a purpose”, “good and evil are in perfect harmony”, “God is a loving Father”. What is ‘true’ here and what is ‘false’?

Further still, what does it profit a man to know all there is to know if finally all his knowledge serves him for nothing, least of all to be, or become, what he is supposed to be or become? Can it really call that true (i.e. genuine, worthwhile, knowledge)? If not what is then ‘knowledge’? Is it not that purposeful knowledge, that knowledge which alone can serve him truly to achieve his final destiny? And what is the meaning here of ‘true’ and ‘truly’? Is it not that knowledge which serves no useful purpose, which does not, or cannot, result into a fruitful activity, a sterile knowledge? And if it is, can it still be called true knowledge?

All this is, of course, is true – and profoundly so. We shall return to these questions later when we shall deal with language and its functions, especially religious language. But from the epistemological stand point, the Pragmatic Theory of Truth needs, according to us, to be severely qualified. Firstly, scientific ‘knowledge’ and scientific ‘truth’ cannot, without much further ado, be taken to be the paradigm of ‘knowledge’ and ‘truth’ in general. To do so would presuppose certain presuppositions which would be themselves subject to non-scientific ‘proof’ – and hence to a non-pragmatic concept of ‘knowledge’ and ‘truth’. Secondly, from a semantic, point of view, it would be arbitrary to define ‘truth’ stipulatively since there is a conventional (everyday) meaning of the term. All one could say is that in such and such field of knowledge, or in any kind of ‘hypothesis’, it would be inappropriate to speak of ‘truth’ but of something else – something which we did ourselves – or, that in such a case, one cannot come to know the truth at all! Thirdly, from a religious point of view, belief, no matter how ‘significant’ it is, or should be, would lose all its, religious value (and therefore its ‘significance’). If it could be shown to rest on no real foundation – i.e. with a basis in reality. A false conviction may still be ‘significant’ to somebody but this does not make it ‘true’. Fourthly, to say that ‘truth’ is relative (i.e. known only progressively, and in accordance with the capacity, and ‘interpretation’ of the knower and as ‘significant’ to him or not) shows only that one has to distinguish between different fields of knowledge, different functions of language different levels of understanding, and different kinds of ‘illocutions’. Relativism (which says that no objective truth can be known to all, and therefore, in no sense at all, can one say to be absolutely certain about anything) can be shown to be like Skepticism, evidently self-contradictory.

4.4 THE COHERENCE THEORY

Because of the difficulty we discussed with regard to the ‘correspondence’ theory, some interpret ‘truth’ as coherence between a proposition and other well-established true propositions. If it can be shown that this proposition does not contradict these well-established propositions, then it can be called ‘true’. As is clear, this theory presupposes that before we start asking ourselves whether a proposition is true, we would have already agreed, explicitly or implicitly, on certain other – propositions as being true. For example, we ask ourselves whether the proposition, “abortion is murder” is true or false, we shall have first to agree on whether the following propositions are also true or false, namely, “to kill a person unnecessarily is murder”, “the unborn child is a person”, “abortion is to kill a person unnecessarily”. Now supposing that we agree that these propositions are true, it follows that our original propositions can be seen to be ‘true’. In other words, it is logically implied by, not in conflict with, coheres with, the previously agreed-upon truths.

In its simplest form, this theory equates 'truth' with logical positivism. As could be expected, logical positivism (about which we shall be speaking later) renounces all idea of truth as correspondence with facts and interprets it as correspondence or coherence with presuppositions themselves. Or to put it differently, for it the 'facts' are the propositions themselves. But in its more radical form, this theory is the epistemological aspect of that more general theory according to which the laws of thought not only are the laws of being itself in the sense that they correspond to them, but are the laws of being in the sense that they are their origin. So the primacy is given not to being over thought but to Thought (with a capital T) over all beings. And if Thought is essentially consistent, then if one could work out a logically consistent view of Reality, this must necessarily reflect Reality as it is in fact. And a given proposition, or judgment, if it coheres with this whole logically consistent view of Reality, is true, otherwise false (Idealism, e.g. that of Spinoza, Hegel in the West, to a certain extent that of Sankara in India).

Here again we have a lot to learn from this theory. When a judgement is expressed in a proposition – in a proposition which is made up of concepts, notions, etc. – it is expressed in fact in a particular 'linguistic field' where not only the truth of the propositions but also the meaning of the concepts themselves are mutually related. And there are more than one 'linguistic field' (or as it is sometimes called 'universe of discourse') such as the scientific, the aesthetic, the legal, the economical, the moral, the religious, etc. For example, the proposition "Human being is composed of body and soul" may be true in a Scholastic philosophical 'linguistic field' (where 'human being' 'composed', 'is', 'body', and 'soul' have a specific meaning and the truth of the judgement depends on the truth of many other related judgements, like "being is composed of matter and form", "spiritual acts cannot intrinsically depend on matter", etc.). But that same proposition may be either false or at least unintelligible in another 'linguistic field' (as in Samkhya's or in materialism, etc.). A proposition in an Euclidean geometrical 'linguistic field' may be false or unintelligible in a non-Euclidean one; a logical proposition in a two-valued logical 'linguistic field' may be false in a three-valued logical one, etc.

In Philosophy of religion, we take pains to show how a religious tenet (e.g. "Christ is the Son of God" in Christianity, or "Atman is Brahman" in Vedanta) can either be made intelligible and much less said to be true or false except within the whole context of its respective religious tradition, which is, as it were, its "matrix". Hence the meaninglessness of trying to understand a 'text' out of its 'con-text'. Hence too the misunderstandings which can arise if one tried to compare and contrast different philosophical, religious, etc. opinions, beliefs, doctrines, before one has made sure that one has first understood each in its respective 'linguistic field'.

All this is therefore very true. Still does logical coherence enough to say that something is 'true' (in the generally accepted meaning of the term)? We have already remarked that to give a stipulative definition to an already conventionally agreed-upon meaning of a term is arbitrary. But apart from this semantic question, it is clear that proponents of the logical coherence theory of truth are led to such a definition of theirs because of the epistemological difficulty we discussed with regard to the 'correspondence theory'. More directly still, one could point out that this theory does not solve this same difficulty. For its presupposition (that before we start asking whether a proposition is true or not we have to have already agreed to consider other proposition as true) requires that we would have already settled the logical coherence of each of these latter

propositions with still other propositions. The ‘infinite regress’ would be required here too. (And it would be no answer to say that as a matter of fact, we ‘inherit’ the truth of these propositions from society. The question here is not how in fact we come to know from the time of our childhood up, but how we can philosophically understand ‘truth’!). Recall that we too required self-consistency and coherence in any ‘good’ (i.e. appropriate) hypothesis. But we added too that precisely because as such a hypothesis remains a hypothesis, it would be out of place to ask whether it is true or false. Or in other words, we did not consider hypothesis as such, in spite of its logical self-consistency and coherence, necessarily true.

So while ‘true’ can in the formal sciences (Logic, Mathematics) be considered to be the equivalent of ‘logical consistent’ precisely because formal sciences, by their very nature, do not refer to any specific object(fact, state of affairs), it cannot be so considered elsewhere. So, can we at least agree that if a whole system of philosophical understanding of Reality (i.e. not simply of propositions) is in fact self-consistent and coherent, it does mirror it as idealism believes? The difficulty here is that it is not impossible to imagine two perfectly self-consistent and coherent systems of the sort which are not compatible among themselves, or even contradictory to one another. In this case, when we have two or even more such systems, the question arises which of them is one to call ‘true’ – supposing that in virtue of the principle of contradiction, they cannot be all called true. There could be many answers to this question. One could, for example, say that on further analysis one can always discern in what one had at first sight mistaken to be a perfectly self-consistent and coherent theory, inconsistencies, in such a way that one would finally realize that there can be only one logically self-consistent and coherent view of Reality. Or, one could answer, Reality can in fact be mirrored in two or more such systems, provided that they are perfectly self-consistent and coherent, even though they are not compatible (but not contradictory). Again one could answer that what seems to be contradictory on a logical, epistemological level, need not be contradictory on the meta-logical, trans-empirical level (i.e. the level of Reality as a whole in its ultimate causes), etc. All this would be interesting to discuss (as we do in Philosophy of Religion) but it is clear that ultimately, on the epistemological level, if a self-consistent and coherent view of Reality is to be said to be true, whether or not it is the only possible one or not, it is not just because it is so but because it would have been shown to correspond to what the case is, i.e. to the nature and structure, etc. of Reality itself.

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer

1. Describe what truth is for William James.

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2. What is truth according to coherence theory?

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4.5 THE PERFORMATIVE THEORY

To understand this theory, we must go back to what we said about ‘illocution’. We recall that these are kinds of ‘speech-acts’ which we do – perform – when we say something. Now when I say, for example, “It is true that the world is round”, do I do anything more than when I say “The world is round”? According to some (e.g. F.P. Ramsey), I am certainly not giving any more information about the world in the first case than in the second. All I am doing more when I add, “it is true that ...” is adding emphasis, style, or indication as to the position the statement has in the whole of my argument.

Others, however, are not slow in remarking that this is a confusion between a ‘first-order assertion’ (in our case, ‘the world is round’ where something is said or stated about the ‘world’) and a ‘second-order assertion’ (in our case, ‘it is true that the world is round’ where something is said or stated about the whole proposition as a whole, namely, ‘the world is round’). Now some philosophers like P.F. Strawson while pointing out that ‘true’ (or false) occur only in a ‘second-order assertions see in the use of the term ‘true’ a sign of the speaker’s affirmation (and in the use of the term ‘false’ of his denial). Thus, to keep to our example, when I say , “It is true that the world is round” (“That the world is round is true”) what I am doing is indicating that I agree (believe, am convinced, concede, affirm) that the world is round. Hence the ‘performative’ function of the term ‘true’ (and correspondingly of the term ‘false’).

The distinction between ‘first-order assertions’ and ‘second-order assertions’ is useful and well-made. In Logic we speak of the distinction between ‘first intentions’ and ‘second intentions’ – but that was with regard to ‘concepts’. As a ‘second intention’ concept is a concept of a concept, so too a ‘second-order assertion’ is an assertion of an assertion . In “The world is round”, the logical term of the proposition serving as its ‘subject’ (the ‘what ‘ something is said about) is ‘the world’; in the proposition “That the world is round is true”, the logical term is not ‘the world’ but the whole proposition “the world is round”. Something is said about this whole proposition – and what is said is that it corresponds to what the case is.

Now it is undoubtedly true that when I say “It is true that the world is round” I am doing something more than giving information about the world. I am doing something more, namely, I am indicating that I too believe, affirm, agree, etc. that the world is round. It would make no sense to say , “It is true that the world is round, but I do not believe it (or am not convinced of it).” If I was not convinced of it, I would not say that it is true in the first place. Not only are the two propositions not identical, but their ‘illocutionary load’ is different. Whereas “The world is round” has one ‘illocution’ (a constative), “It is true that the world is round,” has two: the constative and the expressive, the former affirming something about the world, the latter expressing some attitude (in this case, of belief, agreement, conviction, etc.) of the one who affirms. It is only of constatives that the question of ‘truth’ arises, as we have seen. So by reducing a constative to an expressive is neither logically nor epistemologically sound, and the question of ‘truth’ remains unsolved.

Other authors (e.g. A.J. Ayer) similarly reduces moral propositions (e.g. “abortion is murder”), esthetic propositions (e.g. “this girl is beautiful”), indeed religious propositions (e.g. “God exists”) to mere expressive. We shall return to him later. But the same criticism could be addressed to him as the one we are addressing to the Performative Theory of Truth in general. Still, one big lesson we could learn from it is that even in religious language, propositions do often have a big expressive illocutionary load (and not simply constative). When I say, for example, “God is a loving Father” I am not simply making a statement of fact (or of an alleged fact) but I am expressing some attitude, or attitudes of mine!

4.6 TRUTH AND ERROR

When one discusses ‘truth’ one cannot help mentioning ‘falsehood’ is the opposite of ‘truth’ (in all senses, ontological, moral and logical). If, in the logical, or epistemological sense, ‘truth’ is the correspondence between what is affirmed or denied to what the case, ‘falsehood’, in the same sense, is the non-correspondence between the two. If a true judgment (or proposition) is that which corresponds to what the case is, a false judgment (or proposition) is that which does not, etc. And if the ‘truth’ lies, strictly speaking, in the judgment, as we have said, so does ‘falsehood’. – now when I pass a true judgment, I am right, when I pass a false judgment I am wrong. In the latter case, I commit an error, I am mistaken.

The very possibility of perceptual error could at least partially account for the many trends in Western Philosophy which sought to base knowledge, or at least to finally explain it, on purely rational grounds and not on sense-perception. We already have had the occasion to touch on this point in a different context when we referred to Rationalism and the fundamental role of ‘reason’ in the ‘re-construction’ of the objects of perception. But in this particular context, we wish to refer to all kinds of trend of thought in Western Philosophy which in a kind of Idealist way sought to base knowledge on an ‘apperception’ of universal and abiding ‘Ideas’ like Plato, or on some absolutely sure and indubitable “clear and distinct ideas’ like Descartes – or , in a different sense, on the ‘a-priori’ forms of the mind itself, like Kant, etc. All of these distrusting the reliability of sense-perception because of the possibility of perceptual error and the ever-shifting nature of our knowledge based on sense-objects and perception , looked for a surer footing for knowledge. Seeing that the ‘formal sciences’ do not depend on sense-perception for their truth and justification, Spinoza tried to build up his whole philosophy “in the manner of geometry” (starting with axioms and definitions and proceeding with theorems) and modern Logical Positivists do not hesitate to take Mathematics as the paradigm of all knowledge.

Speaking of sense perception: No matter how perceptual error is to be explained, it is to be noted that if we can speak of perceptual error at all, i.e. if we somehow or other can come to detect it and show that it is an error, it is because, paradoxically enough, sense-perception is fundamentally reliable. In English, however, by ‘error’ we do not mean perceptual error alone. We can commit errors – be mistaken – in drawing false conclusions from given data (in ‘inference’), in believing unreliable witnesses, etc. But here again, if we can speak at all of ‘error’ at all it is because of our capacity for truth! The ‘primary datum’, then, whether in perception or in any other way of coming to know, is our capacity for the truth! But the ever-groping mind for the truth, the wonder and mysteriousness of Reality and the admittedly limited means to attain it, the spatio-temporal conditionings and historicity of human beings, the

physical and psychological barriers (disease of the senses, weariness and laziness, bias and prejudice, inadvertence and non-chalancy, etc.), remains always subject to error – but also and at the same time capable of recognizing the error and overcome it! But this means too that our knowledge of Reality remains always partial, imperfect, relative (not ‘relativistic’!), certain up to a certain extent and uncertain up to another!

Check Your Progress III

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer

1. What is a ‘second-order assertion’?

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2. How do we show that perception is fundamentally reliable?

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4.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have seen the four prominent theories of truth and spoken of error as related to and different from truth. The correspondence theory says that truth is “the adequation of the mind to the object”. In other words truth is the correspondence itself between what I affirm or deny to what is really the case. Coherence theory of truth interprets ‘truth’ as coherence between a proposition and other well-established true propositions. If it can be shown that this proposition does not contradict these well-established propositions, then it can be called ‘true.’ By pragmatic theory of truth William James speaks more in terms of ‘meaning’ or ‘view’ of life. If an assertion, and the view of life which is thus made up of such assertions, function satisfactorily in my life, if, in other words, it gives meaning and purpose to my life, then that assertion and view of life are true. Of course they may be ‘true’ to me and not to you. James applies this also to religious propositions expressive of religious beliefs. And in this he is followed by others more recent thinkers of whom we shall speak later in a related but different context. No matter how perceptual error is to be explained, it is to be noted that if we can speak of perceptual error at all, i.e. if we somehow or other can come to detect it and show that it is an error, it is because, paradoxically enough, sense-perception is fundamentally reliable.

4.8 KEY WORDS

Correspondence theory of truth: “The adequation of the mind to the object”.

Noumenon: An object as it is in itself independent of the mind, as opposed to a phenomenon (Kant)

Samvada: self-consistency, one of the characteristics of truth.

4.9 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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