Theories of Truth

INTRODUCTION

The words ‘true’ and ‘false’ are sometimes used in ordinary language as adjectives of things and persons as in phrases like “a true friend”, ‘true patriotism’, ‘true love’, and in expressions like “a false tooth”, “a false alarm”, “a false button” etc. In epistemology however we are concerned with ‘truth’ and ‘falsity’ as common properties of true and false propositions as shown in the last section. With regard to such properties two questions can perhaps be raised. If we ask the question what is the nature of truth, we are seeking a definition of truth as distinguished from falsity. If again we ask the question, how is a true proposition known to be true, we are demanding the test or the criterion of truth. In the former case we are asking what is it that makes the true judgments true as distinguished from erroneous ones; in what does truth and falsity consist. What is the character of a judgment which makes us say that it is true? But the problem of the test or criterion of truth is something different. The question here is how we come to know that a judgment is true as distinguished from an erroneous one. What is the criterion by which we measure or appreciate the truth of a judgment? Truth and the knowing of truth being different, the two questions should be kept distinct. The knowing of truth is only a psychological accident and judgment may be true or false without being known as such (Russell).

Though there is an important element of truth in this view, the distinction cannot be regarded as absolute. The realists make a separation between truth and its test and believe that the nature of truth consists in correspondence or agreement of our judgment with the external reality, whereas it test or criterion may consist in self-evidence, coherence or practical success. A judgment that is obvious or judgment that does not contradict our established body of knowledge or a judgment that works in practice are known to be true. But a judgment is true because it agrees with reality. Such distinction between nature of truth and test of truth implies that a truth can exist without being known as such. But a truth which is unknown is meaningless to us. If it is to be real it must be known and appreciated as such. Further truth is a form of intellectual value and value depends on valuation or appreciation. If truth is correspondence and its test is something different as the realists contend, then we are to test truth by something different from truth which seems absurd. Truth, therefore, must be its own criterion. Thus the distinction between the nature and criterion of truth cannot be absolute and truth depends on truth-getting or valuation. But it may be that the nature of truth does not lie exhaustively in any individual mind’s appreciation. If so, truth will be entirely subjective in character and utter individualism must be the result. We are to admit that truth as an intellectual value is something objective, but it can exist for me only as it is known or appreciated by me. Truth, therefore, is both subjective and objective.

There are different kinds of truth, and we can discover the truths of different propositions in many different ways, for example, truth as correspondence, truth as coherence, truth as pragmatic etc.

CORESPONDENCE THEORY OF TRUTH

According to the correspondence theory of truth, a proposition is true if it corresponds to a fact; that is with a state-of-affair. How does a true proposition corresponds to a facts? According to A. C. Ewing, the word “Correspondence” suggests that when we make a true judgment, we have sort of picture of the reality in our minds and that our judgment is true because, this picture is like the reality it represents.

According to the pragmatic theory of truth, truth is what “Works”, and true proposition is one that works. Suppose, I believe that there are living organisms on Mars. If I go to Mars and find living organisms there, then indeed my belief has turned out to be true (i.e. “it works”) and it is true because that proposition describes and actual state of affairs.

‘Coherence’ is a relation among propositions. ‘A group of proposition is coherent’ means each of them supports the other ones – they are mutually supporting. Whatever the relation of a group of propositions may be to each other, the question of truth does not arise until we consider whether any or all of these propositions reports an actual state – of-affairs in the world. In this sense coherence is a matter of degree.
be of no use here, because, this gets us not one step ahead. ii) Sometimes “fact” refers to an actual state of affair. A true proposition is one that corresponds to a fact - that is, to an actual state of affair: How does a true proposition correspond to a fact? The word “correspond” is here being ripped out of its usual context, for a true proposition does not correspond to a fact in the way that the colour sample on the colour-chart corresponds to the colour of the paint on my wall. There is certainly no resemblance between a proposition and state-of-affairs or even between a sentence and a state-of-affairs. We can compare the correspondence in the way the names of books on library cards correspond to the books themselves that is; there is a one-to-one correspondence between them. If we wish to say that there is a correspondence between a proposition and a fact in this sense no harm is done.

According to A.C Ewing, the word “correspondence” suggests that when we make a true judgment, we have a sort of picture of the real in our minds and that our judgment is true because, this picture is like the reality it represents. But our judgments are not like the physical things to which they refer. The images we use in judging may indeed in certain respects copy or resemble physical things, but we can make a judgment without using any imagery except words, and words are not in the least similar to the things which they represent. We must not understand “correspondence” as meaning copying or resemblance.

COHERENCE THEORY OF TRUTH

Coherence is a relation among propositions, not a relation between a proposition and something else (a state-of-affairs) which is not a proposition.

But what, kind of relation among propositions is coherence? Are a group of propositions coherent with one another when they are consistent with one another?

No, for this relation too weak: the propositions “2 + 2 equals 4”, “Caesar crossed the Rubicon” and “Minks are far-bearing animals” are all consistent with one another: that is, not one of them contradicts any of the others. But a group of propositions is not coherent unless each of them supports the other ones - they are mutually supporting. If five witnesses who do not know one another each testify (independently of one another) to seeing Mr. White in Pillsville last Thursday evening, their reports are mutually coherent in this sense. If nothing is known about the veracity of witnesses, the testimony of each witness taken alone would easily be discounted; but if they all say the same thing without having been in conspiracy with one another, the testimony of each one of them tends to support the testimony of others; each lends strength to the other, but let us notice a few things about this. The testimony of one or all of the witnesses taken together is not what makes the proposition (that Mr. White was in Pillsville last Thursday evening) true. The testimony of the witnesses is only evidence that the statement is true; it does not make it true; it points to the truth of the statement without being what the truth of the proposition consists in. Indeed, the combined testimony of the witnesses is quite compatible with the falsity of the statement about Mr. White: all the witnesses may have been victims of mistaken identification.

A body of propositions may be coherent and yet not true. There are numerous systems of geometry, each of which consists of a body of coherent propositions, but not all of these systems of propositions can be true of the world. Whatever the relations of a group of propositions may be to each other, the question of truth does not arise until we consider whether any or all of them make true propositions report an actual state-of-affairs in the world or, if you prefer, corresponds to a state-of-affairs about the world.