Can Truth Be Defined?

The word 'truth' is so commonly used that we would expect it to be a concept that could be easily defined. However, as soon as we start to reflect upon the word, we realise that this is not such an easy task. In the field of philosophy, where statements are analysed for veracity, we would expect a working definition of truth to be essential. The important analytical tools of logic use 'truth' as a fundamental concept; for example, we talk of the truth or otherwise of a proposition and there are truth-tables for the analysis of combinations of propositions. It seems, then, that 'truth' had better be defined otherwise the foundations of philosophical analysis would be shaky indeed. So while it *should* be possible to define truth, can we *actually* define it? I believe that we must, so in this essay I will argue for a definition. A cursory look at any philosophical textbook would show many different approaches towards defining truth, each with its own attacks and defences. It is not possible in this brief essay to discuss all these possibilities, so I will argue for a definition that, with a modification, I believe can withstand two of the most common objections: verification and the Liar Paradox. In this essay, the term 'statement' refers to properties or events, but does not include epistemological issues such as belief or fiction.

Many would agree that for a statement to be true, it must be correspond to things as they are (Sainsbury, 1995). Many philosophers have formulated definitions using this principle including Aristotle, Russell, in his Correspondence Theory (1998) and, more recently, Tarski (1969). I propose using Tarski's formulation as the basis for a definition:

'***P***' is true iff ***p*** ..... *(1)*

Here the sentence ***P*** is being referred to (shown by using quotation marks) in order for it to be examined for its correspondence to ***p***, the fact of the matter. So if ***p*** is true, then truth is captured by the sentence. Other theorists have put forward objections to this definition, but before considering two of them, I will make a

modification utilising the Possible Worlds theory. There are three properties of this theory that I wish to use:

- 1. Possible worlds can only contain logically consistent objects
- 2. If something is necessarily true, then it is true in all possible worlds
- 3. If something is possibly true, then it is true in at least one possible world.

So modifying Tarski's formulation:

'***P***' is true iff ***p*** occurs in at least one possible world

To examine the implications of this modification, consider the sentence:

'a triangle has three sides'

This is necessarily true because it is logically consistent and its internal definition means that it will always be true. It is true in all possible worlds, no verification is necessary. There are statements that are possibly true, that is, they will be true in at least one possible world, and verification would be needed to establish whether the actual world is one of these. An example is:

'*snow is white*'.

Using the above formulation:

'*snow is white*' is true iff ***snow*** is ***white*** in at least one possible world.

In our actual world, we can show that this is the case, however in another possible world it may be red. So in one world the statement may be true, in another it may be false. These possibilities are logically consistent but in order to ascertain the truth-value we need to have specific evidence from the actual world. These two examples show that 'truth' is the confirmation that a statement corresponds to the state of affairs in at least one world.

The first objection I will consider can be illustrated by Russell's view: "Thus a belief is true when it corresponds to a certain associated complex..." i.e. the fact of the matter (Russell 1998, p74). So if it were impossible to determine the correspondence in order to determine truth, how can it be an adequate definition of

truth? For example:

'It snowed in Oxfordshire in 10,000BC'.

This may be true, and certainly there must be a fact (true or false) that corresponds to the event, but it is not possible to be verified. If that is the case, how can an unverifiable correspondence provide a definition of truth? However if we add to the sentence: '*in at least one possible world*', the truth definition holds notwithstanding any difficulty in ascertaining its verification in the actual world. The important issue is that we are looking to define truth, and any verification of its value must be separated from it; we are stating what it means for something to be true whereas verification is a matter for epistemology.

The second objection is that raised by the so-called Liar Paradox. There are many types of this in the literature, but a simple example is:

This sentence is not true.

To analyse this, using Tarski's definition (1) ('***P***' is true iff ***p***):

1. Let ***P*** be the statement '***F is a'***. Or:

'***F is a'*** is true if and only if it corresponds that ***F*** has the property ***a.***

2. In the liar sentence, '***F is a'*** is the sentence: `***F is not true'.*** Therefore:

'***F is not true***' is true iff it corresponds that ***F*** has the property ***not true***.

3. But '***F is not true'*** is the sentence that is being assessed, so replacing it by ***P***:

'P' is *true* iff ***F*** has the property ***not true.***

4. But because the sentence ***P*** is self-referential, ***F*** actually refers to the whole sentence ***P***. So replacing ***F*** by ***P*** we have:

'P' is ***true*** iff ***P*** has the property ***not true.***

This is a contradiction from which a theory of truth must be rescued. It is questionable whether Liar Paradox sentences can be analysed using Tarski's formulation as they are self-referential, but most importantly there is a contradiction. Now if we add the Possible Worlds modification to the definition by including '*in at least one possible world*', we can see that the contradiction of the

Liar Sentence can be resolved. Possible worlds cannot include logical inconsistencies or contradictions. Therefore the sentence cannot be either necessarily or even possibly true - it cannot be true at all in any possible world. If it cannot be true in any circumstances, it does not damage this definition of truth.

I have argued that this formulation can withstand these two major challenges, but now we need a succinct definition. So, starting from the formulation above:

"'***P***' is true if and only if ***p*** occurs in at least one possible world"

This can be simplified because ***p***, providing it is logically consistent, will occur in at least one world, so we can simplify the 'if and only if' part of the definition:

'***P***' is a logically consistent statement that is true in at least one possible world.

Then by removing the word 'true' and rearranging the wording, we arrive at my proposed definition of truth:

Truth is the correspondence of a logically consistent statement with the occurence of the event or property in at least one possible world.

The theory of truth resulting from this definition implies that for something to be true, the actual world is among the possible worlds in which a logically consistent statement occurs. This consistency guarantees truth and so underpins our logic system, in which 'true = occurs in the actual world', and 'false = absent in the actual world'. A conjunction (p ^ q) in which p = T and q = F is guaranteed to be false because its outcome is logically inconsistent. There may be issues here with non-classical logic systems, but these would need to be examined in another essay. Furthermore, I have not investigated the issue of the truth of a belief as this is an epistemological issue.

A further implication of this definition concerns the truth of future events. That is, if it is true that I will drink a cup of coffee tomorrow, then that must happen. If it is false, then it cannot happen. This leads to fatalism, in which drinking coffee either

had to occur or *could not* occur. This is the problem of determinism. However using the above definition of truth: "it is true that I will drink a cup of coffee tomorrow in a possible world". This will be true, but whether the world in which it is true is the actual one or not is a matter for tomorrow. This definition avoids the issue of fatalism in which what I do tomorrow is already determined by its truth-value.

I have argued that truth can be defined as "*the correspondence of logically consistent statements with the fact of the matter in at least one possible world"*. This definition allows philosophy to be rescued from the dangers of its logical basis being undermined. It is possible to define what it means to be true, notwithstanding limitations in our ability to determine whether or not in the actual world something is true: that is epistemology. So can we answer the question "What is truth?"? Yes we can, truth is that, which in at least one possible world, is the fact of the matter.

Bibliography

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