Essay Unit 15 – John StGeorge - edited

3. What illumination is shed on the realist/anti-realist debate by the claim that the notion of truth is nothing more than a 'useful fiction'?

It may be by virtue of Vaihinger's philosophy 'As If', we are introduced to a persuasive illumination of the realist/anti-realist debate. The illumination to the debate is via the slide into a theory of pragmatism. Vaihinger's philosophy offers an alternative to the competing theories of realist/anti-realist as does the Kantian noumena.

However, in the case of Vaihinger, it is not essential to view an assertion of the unknown as being the known in another perspective. Absolute truth seems a hypothetical target in this milieu of theoretical assertions seeking plausible truth conditions. Truth may well be in the end a vexed question, with contingency being the excluded middle in this debate of the theories. Whilst I am philosophically challenged in gaining a firm understanding of the different theories, it is also comforting that a truth condition, in every assertion, is not a given.

The contingency of assertion seems to revolve around the semantic content in the assertion aiming at the correspondence to reality. Vaihinger's claim that a fiction of doubtful veracity would suffice for truth rather puts the 'cat among the pigeons'. I take a deep breath and hope that I am not the subject that such an assertion is aimed toward in any serious manner.

Evidence and verification sounds more feasible, however, perhaps there is some overlapping here, in regard to the correspondence to facts. How do you substantiate a 'fact' if it is not verified by evidence? Can you say 'that is a fact' and walk away from the debate? Perhaps I am one of those pragmatists who are 'hard to find', however, to me, there seems to be a slide toward 'working in practice' being a viable alternative to the realist/anti-realist debate, but not always.

All assertions are contingent on their acceptance by a plurality of sound-minded interlocutors. However, the decision as to the veracity of an assertion lies in the semantic content of the sentence. The criterion for acceptance therefore is verification by evidence and appearance (anti-realist) as opposed to a correspondence to facts (realist). An alternative to these criteria is the pragmatist's 'working in practice' being sufficiency for acceptance and Vaihinger's theory of fiction that is false or contradictory still serving the purpose of acceptance.

This assemblage of linguistic theorising is becoming rather more pragmatic than determinate and necessarily creating a further extension for the positing of a truth fiction as an alternative. The realist/anti-realist debate seems to take its place as one of many, and depending on the semantics of the assertion, ready and able to fill any spaces between the competing theories.

In this environment, assertions aiming at truth need to contain concepts that have normative and believable semantics. Perhaps the illuminating factor shed on the realist/anti-realist debate is that there are alternative theories to be countenanced rather than the realist/anti-realist debate being the only theory.

What appears certain is that philosophies of Vaihinger and Kant do indeed shed a penetrating light (illumination) on the realist/anti-realist debate, showing plausible alternatives by way of sound dialectic. Therefore, contingency awaits evidence and verification showing a correspondence to reality. Truth conditions establishing a correspondence to facts and the way the world is, accepted by sound minded subjects, allowing for further experiential evidence capable of a change of view. A 'useful fiction' is certainly a facilitative force for illumination on the realist/anti-realist truth debate.