Essay Question:
Can truth be defined?

Essay Answer:

Truth, according to the gospel of John, will (if we know the truth) set us free. Before providing testifying in a US court of law, we are required to swear under oath, 'to give the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth'. As children, we learn that to tell the truth is good and that telling lies can leads to forms of punishment including suspending TV or Playstation sessions for example. We are therefore inculcated with the belief that truth, is good and falsehood bad. Is truth good however, on the premise it can be defined or even exists. Is it always the case that pursuing or telling the truth is the best course of action or are there incidents where not knowing or telling the truth is a more preferable option? If we are to know if truth is good and if or when we should pursue or tell the truth, understanding what is truth is an important first step.

So, what is truth?

Defining truth entails assessing or appraising situations for their factual accuracy or ethical validity. Do we have the correct knowledge of a situation, assuming the situation is real in the first place? Truth, therefore has epistemic, metaphysic and ethical implications. Matters of belief, desire, evidence and reality become part of the debate on the validity of truth.

Agreeing a consistent and comprehensive definition of truth is more challenging however, than we would perhaps think at first glance.

Philosophers have long sought to define truth, having opened the debate on the purpose and value of truth millenniums back. Socrates was to have said that virtues of character are the chief aim of life with truth and reason being key to attaining virtue. Socrates died courageously, having drank a potion laced with hemlock because he would not renounce his beliefs. Accused of corrupting the youth of Athens he encouraged them to question their own beliefs and examine their own lives. 'A life unexamined is a life not worth living' whilst a contestable stance demonstrates the vigour of Socrates conviction that pursuit of truth was not only a basis for consistency and clarity in thought but an essential nutrient for a good life.

On a less existential note, Aristotle defined truth in his book metaphysics as "to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true".

Other philosophers however have downplayed the importance or even existence of truth as a property or concept. Nietzsche in his essay titled "On truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense", referred to truths as "illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are".

Personally, I think truth can be defined. We all tend to hold some idea of what is truth and what conversely constitutes falsehood. Indeed, defining truth seems integral to a functioning society. In day to day living, for example, if I tell my friend I'll meet him Wednesday for a coffee, his commute to the café for our catch up is predicated on his belief that I will be true to my promise of meeting him at the café. Legal testimonies as mentioned above are based on swearing in of witnesses. The insurance industry is underpinned by the principle of "my word is my bond" so truth as a concept pervades our society and it's social, legal and commercial systems amongst others.

Given the established immanence of truth, what are some key elements of truth?

If we assert a proposition, referred to in philosophy as a 'truth bearer', our goal in this assertion is to aim at truth. But our assertions or judgements are not simply true because we call them true, truth has conditions which must be fulfilled in order for the proposition to be true. The proposition must also be consistent with every other true proposition to avoid contradiction.

The linkage of one true proposition to another true proposition is developed in a theory called correspondence theory which states that truth consists of a relation between the object of truth and

statement that makes it true. A common example used is of the statement 'the cat is on the mat'. This statement in order to be true must correspond to the cat (object) actually being on the mat. If the cat is not on the mat, then this statement is false.

Of course, I could have also uttered the statement 'the cat is on the mat' without actually knowing for certainty that the cat was in fact on the mat either because a) I believed the cat was on the mat or b) because of a lucky guess in which case, could I still stake a claim to truth?

Conversely, if I didn't make the statement, the reality of truth would still exist if the cat was situated on the mat. This is referred to as a mind independent definition of truth given it's metaphysical not epistemological nature.

An argument against correspondence theory is that whilst we may have a firm grasp of certain states of affairs in the world, as in the cat on the mat above, claims relating to ethics or abstract concepts in mathematics are less clear. For example, according to the correspondence theory, if we take the square root of 25 being 5, this claim must link to a real fact in the world. Defining what it means to do this however, becomes a challenge. Another example is to how one could link a claim involving modal ability like 'I have never jumped off a cliff but I could have" to a real object (state of affairs) in the world.

Correspondence theory has some key advantages. Firstly, the sense of rigour that when one establishes a claim of truth, that claim is anchored to something in the real world, ergo, there is a real chunk of the world which the truth lays claim to. This is what the Aristotelian definition of truth refers to when it also states 'that what is, that is not, is false'. Secondly, the criteria which the theory makes truth contingent upon, namely what claim the proposition says the world is and whether the world is that way. Therefore, this makes reference to the state of the real world in a way that reliance on a knowledge based criteria of truth alone could not provide.

Theories centred around epistemology have developed nonetheless and are broadly divided into two theoretical camps, coherence theory and pragmatism.

Coherence theory challenges the correspondent view that ties claims of truth to states of affairs in the real world. Correspondence theory is based on the view that for a claim to be true, it must tie into a system of beliefs. A claim therefore is validated if it aligns with and confirms all the other claims in the system. The first noticeable difference between correspondence and coherence theory is that the coherence theory links claims to other claims, so the theory is epistemic in nature whilst correspondence theory is metaphysical tying claims to objects in the real world. Per coherence theory, the claims validity is therefore based on its consistency with other claims in the system.

A noticeable objection to this theory is the reliance on consistency as the basis of truth. By simple negation of all claims in the system, one could also achieve consistency however the consequence being the negation is false.

An alternative epistemic theory is pragmatism. This theory is most closely associated with the American philosophers C.S Pierce and William James. Pierce's focus for truth was on the difference one could make by way of action. To quote, "consider what effects, which might have practical bearing, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then our conception of these effects is our whole conception of the object". Therefore, how things would turn out as a result of our action. Pierce seen truth as a pursuit to an 'end of enquiry' with increasing consensus being achieved as truth became more refined.

William James approached the pragmatic theory from a utilitarian perspective. James wrote that "'the true' is the only expedient in our way of thinking just as 'the right' is the only expedient in our way of behaving".

A common challenge to this view on expediency is that false beliefs can also be viewed as expedient. The case presented by philosophy Stephen Stich, of Harry who knew the correct time of a

plane taking off and subsequently crashing. Harry knowing the correct time of the plane taking off was not expedient in the long term if the plane crashed.

Therefore, equating expediency with truth per James view does not always hold.

We have briefly reviewed a few of the theories of truth but the debate still continues. The argument against the necessity of truth as a concept is put forward in the redundancy theory which argues for example that to state "it is true Caesar was killed" and "Caesar was killed" amount to the same, hence why state 'it is true' at all. Other theories include minimalism state that the conditions for truth should be kept to a minimum. Mathematician and Philosopher, Tarski puts forward the following conditions, that a) truth should assign truth conditions to our language, b) those truth conditions should be derived from the semantics of the language and c) meet the condition of adequacy namely, S is true iff P is true, where S is replaced by the name of a sentence and P by the sentence itself.

The debate of how to define truth will no doubt continue however with every step forward serving further convergence on 'the truth'.

Will we ever find an ultimate definition of truth or is perhaps the pursuit of truth simply the summiting of ever higher peaks and refinement of a definition. My view is the latter.