FOUR THEORIES OF TRUTH:
LEARNING FROM THE PHILOSOPHIES OF MEN

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Philosophers are wont to make distinctions. That's one of the things they do best. So it's no surprise when you ask philosophers to define truth that they come up with a range of meanings. I'm aware of at least four such definitions. The definitions reflect propositions that we use in our normal, daily discourse, propositions that we use interchangeably, without a second thought or any attempt to distinguish between them. We can call each of these definitions a "theory of truth," or a way of accounting for the different kinds of statements that we believe are true. These theories have come to be known as the correspondence, coherence, pragmatic, and semantic theories of truth.

Correspondence theory is that when you make a statement, it is true if and only if the statement actually corresponds to reality.

The correspondence theory of truth is the most easily understood. Correspondence theory is "garden variety" truth; that is, it is the theory that most people think of when they are asked, "What is truth?" The theory is that when you make a statement, it is true if and only if the statement actually corresponds to reality. So, when we say "The cat is on the mat," that statement is true under the correspondence theory if, and only if, the cat in question actually is on the mat in question. Likewise, when we say, "Joseph Smith was visited by God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ," that statement is true if and only if Joseph Smith was, in reality, visited by them. A more readily verifiable claim is "All priesthood holders in the LDS church are male." That statement corresponds with reality as we know it. We could go out and find every holder of the priesthood and find that each one is male. We would not find any female priesthood holders. If we did find a female priesthood holder, then the statement "All priesthood holders in the LDS church are male" would be false because it does not correspond with reality. Aristotle was referring to the correspondence theory of truth when he said, of truth in general, "To say that something is when it is, is true. To say that something is when it is not, is false." (Those statements really do make sense if you read them slowly.)

The correspondence theory is not without problems. First of all, when we say that something corresponds to reality, we might find ourselves asking, "How do I know if I am perceiving reality accurately? And what is reality anyway?" If these questions sound like a typically silly philosophical game, try the following experiments. Go outside and look at the sun (don't look too long!); relying strictly on your sense perceptions, how large, do your senses tell you, is the Sun? How far away is it? How hot is it? How fast is it moving across the sky above the earth? Go out

again at night and consider the distance to the stars and their size. Or, moving from the infinitely large to the infinitesimally small, consider the substance of the page you are reading. Do your senses tell you that it is made of molecules, atoms, protons, neutrons, electrons, gluons, mesons, and so-ons? Would your senses tell you what the scientists have told us? Are we not, nevertheless, more convinced in these matters by the mathematically reasoned calculations of the scientists than we are by the data of our own senses? These little experiments don't necessarily bring into question the correspondence of the scientific findings with reality, but they do demonstrate that our perceptions of reality are not always reliable and that reality may be something rather different from what our perceptions tell us.

It is also possible to imagine true statements that have no correspondence with "reality" at all; for example, we know that triangles have three sides and that the sum of their interior angles is 180 degrees; but where in "reality" (read "experience") do we ever find a real triangle, for every "triangle" we come across in our experience is only a representation of a real triangle and not itself a real one (real triangles, remember, are made of lines, which don't exist in our three-dimensional reality, but only in theory, since they have no depth). And we all know that one plus one equal two, but that statement would be true even in a universe consisting of absolutely nothing (except for a mind to think of it). So we can see that there are true statements outside of "reality"; there are truths that don't correspond with reality. Consequently, the set of all true statements is not comprehended in mere correspondence with reality. Whatever truth is, it must be more than simple correspondence. That brings us to our next theory, coherence.

Coherence theory is that certain propositions may have no connection with reality, but be internally consistent (coherent) between statements in a closed system. Mathematics, geometry, physics, and logic are examples of coherent systems of truth. Propositions in these systems don't necessarily correspond with reality (such as the counter-examples we cited above), but they may be true nonetheless. We see coherent truths at work in the claim that "The LDS church is the only true church." Of course, this claim is not based on a carefully conducted survey of every church on the Earth. Rather, this claim is based on the proposition that The *Doctrine and Covenants* 1:31 is true, which is based on the proposition that The *Doctrine and Covenants* is the word of God revealed through the Joseph Smith, which is based on the proposition that Joseph Smith is a prophet, which is based on the proposition that his prophetic claims are true (which, interestingly, is based ultimately on a subjective experience of personal revelation).

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But the coherence theory, too, has its down side. It's possible to imagine a completely coherent system of statements that are false; for example, "The sun is not a star. Everything that is not a star is an enormous ball of Limburger cheese. So, the sun is an enormous ball of Limburger cheese." The reasoning is valid, the system is coherent, but it is based on untruths. Such a system may be easy to spot, but you can imagine a more subtle problem, one in which all of the statements are true except for one: the system may be coherent, but ultimately false.

Pragmatic truths are limited to propositions about the practical realm.

The next theory is called the pragmatic theory. It is, simply, that a proposition is true if it works for whatever purpose you need it. Consequently, pragmatic truths are limited to propositions about the practical realm. For example, we believe that the Word of Wisdom is true because it works. We don't really know the reality here, and it is kind of coherent for the same reasons that the church is true, but at some point our belief in its truth is because we sense that "it works," as demonstrated both by scientific research and anecdotal evidence. Unfortunately, the pragmatic theory suffers from the problem of all empirical, inductive, or scientific observations, that the "truth" of such propositions could be invalidated if there were enough of the right kind of evidence amassed against it. They are, simply, not "necessary" judgments (that is, true in all cases, as are mathematical propositions); rather, they are what we call "contingent" (the truth of which depends on the circumstances). Furthermore, its possible to imagine a so-called pragmatic truth that is just plain morally wrong: although it may be pragmatically true that discovering a untraceable method of pinching a dollar from the bank accounts of each of ten million unwitting individuals every year is a great way to amass wealth, it is nonetheless morally wrong to do so.

Finally, we come to the semantic theory. This theory is a little unusual, but it's kind of the flip side of the correspondence theory. It is that the truth of a proposition has everything to do with our language and only incidentally with "reality." For example, if we claim, "Mount Everest is 29,029 feet tall," that statement may be true under the correspondence theory, but what in the world is a Mount Everest, and what, pray tell, is a foot? Mount Everest is just the name we have arbitrarily assigned to a very massive geographic phenomenon in a landmass we have arbitrarily called Asia, and a foot is just the name we have arbitrarily assigned to a particular unit of measure that is yea long. There is no essential truth value to those phenomena in and of themselves. They are just phenomena. Our language assigns truth value to them, but our language is artificial. We see an example of semantic truth in the scriptures, when Adam is naming animals, and—as Mark Twain writes—Eve insists on calling a zebra a "zebra" because, of course, it was

the animal most like a zebra, as anyone could plainly see. Well, you can understand the problem here.

These four theories of truth, then, account for most of the propositions that confront us. They are the "standard" theories, and, for the most part reflect a static, objective relationship between a subject (us) and an object (the world), a relationship in which the subject "speaks the truth" if she or he gets the relationship right, much as Aristotle described. There is, on the other hand, another, more modern way of looking at the problem, one in which the relationship between the subject and the object is dynamic, informing, affecting, and effecting each other. This relationship is much more subjective—a truth-relationship that 19th century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegäard has described as "being in" as opposed to "having". Truth, then, would not be "out there" as something that we might have or possess or objectify; rather, truth would be something that we do or live. That, however, is another problem for another time.