

THE PROBLEM OF EPISTEMIC TRUTH

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Abstract

The problem of epistemic truth revolves round the inability of philosophers to situate the precise meaning of the concept of truth. But there are some philosophers like Ramsey and Ayer who believes that there is really no separate problem of truth as it is ordinarily conceived. The paper therefore aims to examine whether the problem of truth in epistemology exists or not. To achieve this, the method of conceptual analysis is adopted. The paper finds out that the theories of truth are efforts to further explicate the meaning of truth. The paper concludes that the problem of truth exists and efforts are made to proffer solutions to resolving it.

Keywords: Epistemic truth, Epistemology, Problem of truth, Judgments, beliefs, propositions, coherence and correspondence.

Introduction

What is truth? The Holy Bible records that Pontius Pilate was one of those who first raised this fundamental question. It is commonly believed that the philosopher who is also concerned with 'truth' is one of those best suited to answer the question. Many definitions have been given as answers to the question of the meaning of truth and these answers are said to constitute the theories of truth. We have the correspondence, coherence, pragmatic and semantic theories of truth among others. Conceptually speaking, do these theories really answer our question? If not, what does the question 'what is truth' really entail? Right from Aristotelian period there has been a fundamental disagreement over what truth really means. This lack of consensus over the meaning of truth constitutes a big epistemology problem for the philosophers who concern themselves with truth. But there are some philosophers like Ramsey and Ayer who believes that there is really no separate problem of truth as it is ordinarily conceived.

The aim of this paper is therefore to examine whether the problem of truth in epistemology exists or not. Our position is to argue for the existence of the problem and proffer some solutions.

The Problem of Epistemic Truth

According to Ramsey¹ in his essay "Facts and propositions," the problem we think we have in relation to the question 'what is truth' lies in our inability to analyze judgment or statement correctly. He says that "if we have analyzed judgments, we have solved the problem of truth"² let us briefly consider his view in regard to the claim that there is no separate problem of truth as it is ordinarily conceived. According to Ramsey, statements, with truth locutions can be analyzed 'salva veritate' and without loss of meaning, into statement which lack truth and falsehood. In other words, statement with truth locutions can be analysed where truth and falsehood would be redundant. Ramsey considered two sorts of sentences to which truth and falsehood may be predicated. First, he considers sentence which are explicitly stated. For example, if I assert that 'it is true means that "Benin City is the capital of Edo State"'. Similarly, if I assert that 'it is false that Caesar was murdered' my assertion means no more than "Caesar was not murdered". Thus, one may generalize from instances of these examples and conclude that the statement "it is true that P"³ is merely an expanded version of the statement that not P". In other words if I assert "yes, that

is true”, or No, that is not true” in reply to a statement made by my wife, what my assertions imply is that I am in a situation of agreeing or disagreeing with what my wife had just said.

The words ‘true’ and ‘false’ as here employed, according to Ayer, are not eliminable or at least in a straight forward way. Thus, unlike Ramsey, Ayer believes that the words ‘true’ and ‘false’ can, in this way, function as predicates. In other words, there is a sense in which one can reassert a statement of which one predicates truth. But this may not always be so for there, according to Ayer, are instances where a person’s statements which he has made can be true on the basis of the speaker’s “treatment honesty” as Ayer puts it:

*What I am doing in such a case is to give a
blank cheque, as it were, to the person in
whom I am reposing confidence*⁴

Similarly, a first-person account can be analysed in the same way according to Ayer. For example, if I say, ‘forgot what I told you, but I know that I would not lie to you; so whatever I said, I am sure that it was true’, I am thereby reaffirming my general honesty in dealing with my interlocutors. According to Ayer in his book: *Language Truth and Logic*, when the question ‘what is truth’ is considered, it would be found that it is not a question that gives rise to any genuine problem. He seems to say that even when the problem of truth exists, such problem will not be difficult to solve. Ayer thinks that the reason why some philosophers believe in a genuine problem of truth is because of the failure of such philosophers to properly address the issue involved in the problem of truth. Instead of such philosophers addressing themselves to the definition truth they are concentrating on looking for a general criterion of truth.

For Ayer, this amounts to making inquiry into the cause of what makes statements true instead of defining statements directly. Ayer believes that the problem of truth is not located on how to find: scientific explanation to what statements are true or not. He seems to think that we cannot significantly ask for general criteria of truth. Ayer then concludes that in spite of his concessions by way of slight disagreement with Ramsey’s view, his position still vindicate his claim that there is no separate problem of truth.

Both Ramsey and Ayer identify the problem of truth with the problem of the analysis of judgments or statements. Wiredu shares this view but he goes beyond the mere analysis of judgment by positing that the problem of the analysis of judgment transforms into the problem of how we come to make judgments that is the nature of inquiry. In other words, an improper analysis of judgments can lead to a truncated account of the nature of inquiry. Wiredu argues that if we take the problem of truth to be the same as the provision and explication of criterion of truth, then it would be difficult to give a general criterion of truth. It could be argued that to give a general criterion of truth is to expound a theory of truth and this is exactly what the correspondence and the semantic theories have done respectively. In criticizing Ramsey, we shall rely on Wiredu’s insights. But before that, we shall quickly point out that Ramsey’s redundancy’ theory is untenable on the ground that, if I say “it is true that Ojo is hardworking” which means the same as “Ojo is hardworking for example, the question which this elicits is, how do we come to have the concept of truth.

Given the information my assertions convey? Does it mean one has made an unnecessary reduplication of effort in this regard? Ramsey might object by saying that when it is said that ‘it is true that Ojo is hardworking’, no new assertion over and above “Ojo is hardworking” is made. It could be argued that this kind of objection arises from lack of adequate understanding of the meaning of what is meant when the words “it is true” is added to an assertion. The words, ‘it is true’ add some ‘weight’ to assertions, making them to be ‘trustworthy’.

Following Wiredu, Ramsey confuses a primary judgment with a comparative judgment. To Wiredu, to say that a statement 'P' is true or false, presupposes that the statement is antecedently available. Wiredu calls 'P' the primary judgment and 'P' are true' the comparative judgment. Wiredu makes a distinction between the two judgments. For example, to say that 'Caesar was murdered' and "Caesar 'was not murdered does not detract from the fact that two assertions already have truth-value assignments. It should be noted that the affirmative statement 'Caesar was murdered' has the truth-value 'true' while the statement 'Caesar was not murdered' has the truth-value 'false'.

Therefore to prefix the phrases with "it is true" and 'it is false' Wiredu further argues, which might have carried the indices of truth-value assignments, is to corroborate' or not, the primary truth-value assignments. In addition, Ramsey's view seems to miss the mark for the words 'true' and 'false' cannot be easily eliminated, for statements 'true' and 'false' play important roles in our daily life. Besides, most arguments are rendered in statements, with truth - locutions. If 'true' and 'false' were to be redundant; such arguments could not have arisen in the first place. To say that truth is redundant implies that the quest for the solution to the problem of truth which philosophers are looking for is meaningless. Ramsey's and Ayer's positions therefore, have no relevance to the problem of truth in epistemology. Following Leslie Armour and Russell, one cannot but disagree with the view that, as ordinarily conceived, there is no separate problem of truth.

The problem of truth arises because of the existence of human beings who hold beliefs. It could be argued that if there were no human beings to hold beliefs, the problem of truth would not arise. In real life we hold certain beliefs to be true and others to be false.⁶We could not have been able to differentiate between true beliefs and false ones, if there were no concept of truth. In other words, it is the knowledge of the notion of truth that enables us to take certain beliefs as true and others false. Beliefs are in turn expressible in language. What we experience in the world themselves are neither certain nor doubtful. It is when we attempt to report them, to record or forecast them, to devise theories to explain them, that we admit the possibility of falling into error, or for that matter of achieving truth.⁷ Language is a phenomenon that is deeply rooted in the culture of the people. Some languages are considered 'richer' than others. With these factors, the conception of truth in one language may vary slightly from that of another language. In all, there seems to be three identifiable factors, following Leslie Armour, in the situation which gives rise to the problem of truth. Firstly, the existence of a world of 'peopled' by 'facts' about which the truth is to be rendered or told. Secondly, the existence of judgments and beliefs and the language in which the truth is to be told and thirdly, the person who is to tell it. The third factor relates to the objectivist character of truth.

Theories of Truth

Having shown the defects in Ramsey and Ayer's positions that there is no genuine problem of truth as it is ordinarily conceived, and also having identified some factors that may give rise to the problem of truth, we submit that there is need for a theory or theories of truth to 'solve' the problem. But before identifying such a theory, we shall state briefly what such a theory should regard as its truth -bearer. We shall then state the conditions required for the formulation of such a theory.

There is the problem of what a theory of truth should adopt as its truth-bearer. The question of what should constitute a truth. Bearer is as controversial as the question 'what is truth' itself. However, the most easily acceptable truth-bearers are beliefs, statements and propositions.

Sentences are not easily acceptable as truth-bearer. For Strawson, it is even improper to speak of sentences as being true or false. The reason is, he believes, that if sentences were true or false; then it means "some sentences would be sometimes true and sometimes false."⁸ Another reason Strawson advanced is that some sentences especially the declarative types, are not capable of truth or falsity, for this reasons. Strawson maintains that not all sentences could be true or false. The reason why statement and beliefs are favoured over and above sentences is that for instance are capable of being true and false while sentence are not. It is further generally believed that sentences cannot be truth-bearer- unless they are first used to make statements.

The view that statements or propositions are truth-bearers elicits the question: what do we mean when we say that a particular statement is true? The question may be answered by saying that we attribute a property to statements when we say they are true. But which kind of property? This second question cannot be easily answered. This could be the reason why Strawson argues that truth cannot be a property of anything, say statements or beliefs. Strawson is of the view that the word 'true' is used to confirm statements already made. In other words, the word 'true' performs confirmatory functions in regards to statement but the question is how is the condition which the word 'true' is to be properly used known? Whatever is said about the use of the word 'true', the question about the condition under which it could be properly employed would always be asked. A theory of truth that purports to solve the problem of truth must at least be prepared to take into consideration beliefs, statements or sentences as its truth-bearer. Also such a theory must fulfil certain minimum conditions for it to be properly accepted as an adequate theory of truth. In discussing the conditions, we shall rely on the insights provided by Russell and O'connor.

Firstly, following Russell, a theory of truth must be such as to admit it of its opposite, falsehood.⁹ Truth is normally contrasted with falsehood and a theory of truth must endeavour to preserve the contrast between truth and falsehood.

Secondly, taking cue from Russell, a theory must make belief its truth-bearer. This condition in a way stresses the human element of the notion of truth. Human beings hold beliefs as already pointed out. Human beings also pass judgments on issues. The problem of truth would not have arisen if there were no human beings to make and pass judgements. As Russell puts it, "a world devoid of matter and consequently no beliefs or statements would contain no truth or falsehood"¹⁰

Thirdly, also borrowing from Russell, is that though truth and falsehood are properties of beliefs and statements, for a belief and statement to be true, it must be in virtue of something other than the belief or statement itself. As Russell pointed out 'truth and falsehood are properties of beliefs to other things, not upon any internal quality of the beliefs.'¹¹ What Russell means by this is that truth and falsehood are extrinsic, not intrinsic properties of beliefs and statements.¹² The advantage the third condition has is that it stresses that empirical truth should at least point — outwards at the world: Given Russell's view, Strawson position that truth cannot be a property cannot be correct afterall. For truth can be a property of beliefs.

And lastly, following O'connor, a theory of truth must fulfil this condition: it must take into consideration that "truth and falsity belong once and for all to beliefs and statements."¹³ One possible interpretation of O'connor's view is that "truth and falsity is not another cognitive or propositionally attitude like corroboration, agreement or commitment".¹⁴ For a theory of truth to successfully deal with the problem of truth, it must fulfil the above minimum conditions. We shall now discuss in a nutshell, some of the theories of truth to find out which best answers the question "what is truth?" Some of the traditional theories formulated to deal with the problem of truth as pointed out earlier, are the coherence and the correspondence theories. Others are the pragmatic

and the semantic theories truth. We shall limit ourselves to the examination of two of these theories

First let us begin with the coherence theory. The theory deals with the problem of truth by positing that the truth of a statement or proposition is dependent on its coherence with other body of statements or propositions. Thus according to the theory:

*To say that what is 'said (usually called judgments, believe of propositions) is true or false is to say that it coheres or fails to cohere with a system of other things which are said that it is a member of a system whose element are related to each other by lies of logical implication as the element in a system of pure mathematics.*¹⁵

Thus testing what is said to be true is equivalent to testing its coherence with the whole system. This system, to which all systems must cohere for the truth or falsity according to Bradley, must be acceptable to members of the scientific community. Thus, 'nothing can be called true unless it fits into one comprehensive account of the universe or reality which itself forms a coherent system'¹⁶. The coherence theory is faced with difficulties. The theory fails because it takes membership of a set as being the truth such that if it happens that a proposition fails to fit into such a set, it then means that it is false. The theory cannot be used to establish the truth of certain statements like "I have headache", 'this food is delicious', "my teacher's car is in a bad state". The fact is that the truth of these statements does not consist in their coherence with a systematic body of truths as contained, say in human physiology or in general mechanics and so on. The statements are true or false not because we have coherence the statements with some absolute truth. The point is that we cannot use the coherence theory to explain the truth or falsity of such ordinary statements. Therefore, the coherence theory fails to address itself to the problem of truth. At best, the theory can be regarded as a 'test' theory used to test the truth or falsity of ordinary person's assertions or those of propositions in pure mathematics.

Unlike the coherence theory, the correspondence theory holds that truth is a relation of a belief and the fact of the state of affairs which exists in the external world. Consider the statement "Ayeni loves Luci" where there is an assumption that Dokpesi believes that Ayeni loves Luci. Following Russell, the statement has the following relations:

1. Ayeni's love for Luci.
2. Dokpesi, who believes that Ayeni loves Luci.

According to Russell, the relationship is ordered. He avers that any attempt to alter it, will make the relation to express another proposition altogether. Propositions are true, Russell further continues, if and only if, the things are orderly related and if the relationship, in this case, (that there is Ayeni. Luci and if Ayeni's love for Luci is true) then the proposition is true. But it should be pointed out that not all propositions are of the relational type and it is not always that propositions are analysed in this manner. Russell perhaps, recognizes this difficulty when he discloses that the "question of truth and falsehood is wrapped in unnecessary mystery owing to a number of causes"¹⁷. Russell himself identifies three of such causes. Firstly, he says people think that their beliefs are truer than being false, thus when such people construct of truth, they give prominence to truth than falsehood. Secondly he says people use 'beliefs' and judgments' vaguely and thirdly. He concludes by saying that some people take truth as something to be adored and something noble.

The correspondence' theory also fails because it makes truth a relation. It should be noted that a relation does not explain anything but only shows how one thing is connected to another, so

truth cannot be a relation. But the correspondence theory seems to agree more with our intuitive notion of truth than the coherence theorist definition of truth, According to our intuitive notion of truth; a statement is true if it is in agreement with reality. The correspondence theorists claim that before a statement can be adjudged to be true or false, it must correspond to 'fact' or not respectively, is analogous to the Russelian condition that a theory of truth must enable us to distinguish between truth and falsehood.

Conclusion

If we accept the correspondence theory as the most correct as Hamylin and Popper had done, in conclusion then, truth cannot depend solely on its coherence with other bodies of judgments as pointed out by Bradley. Thus, the correspondence theory seems, sharing the optimism of Hamylin, the theory which offers plausible solution to the problem of truth.

Endnotes

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