

Truth as Correspondence

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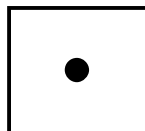
In this short paper, I discuss certain aspects of a “common-sense” approach to truth and falsity. It is my experience that many will object to what I have to say. As you read, if you have objections, try to formulate them carefully, and ask yourself whether I attempt a reply.

Particularly in religious, moral, and philosophical discourse, one sometimes hears that such-and-such is “true for me, but not for you.” Taken seriously and literally, this is a dark and mysterious saying. I think it makes no sense. Let me explain:

I. A Simple Proposal

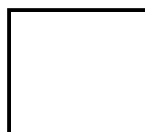
The difficulty with saying that such-and-such is “true for me but not for you” derives from a certain natural account of truth and falsity. Consider the following statement,

There is a dot in this box:



And compare it with,

There is a dot in this box:



The first says that there is a dot in upper box, and the second that there is a dot in lower box. The first is true and the second is false. What is the difference? Intuitively, the statements say something about the way things are, and what they say is true if and only if things are, in fact, that way. The first is true because things are the way it represents them to be, and the second is false because things are not the way it represents them to be. What the first says *corresponds* to reality, but what the second says does not; so the first is true and the second is not. Similarly, “The earth is round” is true because things are the way the statement represents them to be, and “The earth is flat” is false because things aren’t the way it represents them to be.¹ And, more generally, it is natural to think that an arbitrary statement is *true* if and only if reality is as the statement represents it to be—if and only if what it says corresponds to reality—and *false* if and only if it does not.

¹ Of course, if I am grossly deceived about the shape of the earth, then my evaluations of truth and falsity are mistaken. But this does not alter the basic point about *what makes* the statements true and false.

Given this approach to truth, there is an immediate problem for “true for me but not for you.” Suppose a statement correctly represents the world, and ask yourself: Is this person such that the statement is true? Is that person such that the statement is true? etc. If the questions make sense at all, you should answer ‘Yes’ to each—since, by hypothesis, the statement correctly represents the world. Or suppose some statement does not correctly represent the world, and ask: Is this person such that the statement is true? Is that person such that the statement is true? etc. This time, if the questions make sense, you’ll have to answer ‘No’—for, by hypothesis, the statement does not correctly represent the world. If truth is correspondence, then truth is “fixed” by the nature of the statement together with the nature of what it represents; so long as a statement isn’t about what people think, truth and falsity don’t involve what people think; so truth and falsity don’t vary from person to person. But if truth doesn’t vary from person to person, there is no “true for me and false for you.” The point might be worked out in different ways: One might say that if a statement is true (false) for anyone—if it correctly represents the way things are—then it is true (false) for everyone. Or, better, one might say that there is no “true for” at all; a statement isn’t true *for* anyone, but is simply *true* or *false*.

Perhaps, though, saying that such-and-such is “true for me but not for you” does make sense. Perhaps when people say that such-and-such is “true for me but not for you” they don’t mean to say that something is *true* for them but not for you; rather, they mean to say only something like, such-and-such is “what I believe but not what you believe,” or “what I have good reasons for believing but you do not.” These latter claims make perfect sense. Even today, some people believe that the earth is round and others believe that it is flat. And, similarly, some people have access to reasons which others do not. Still, granting the coherence of these claims about beliefs and reasons, it’s not clear that “true for me but not for you” is therefore vindicated. The saying remains, at best, a misleading and loose way of speaking. In fact, it seems a way of obscuring real and significant differences. Given this, I make the following simple proposal: In serious speech, at least, let’s say what we mean. If “true for me but not for you” translates into some claim about belief or justification, leave “true for me but not for you” to the side, and make the corresponding explicit claim about belief and/or justification.

II. Questions

Perhaps you think that it is appropriate to abandon “true for me but not for you” in serious speech. But perhaps you have questions to the effect that there is still some serious sense in which a thing may be true for one person and not for another:

*What if some people believe one way and other people believe another—doesn’t this mean that the thing is true for some people and not for others? No. Suppose some people believe that the earth is round and others believe that it is flat. On a correspondence account, a belief is true if it correctly represents the way things are. In this case, the beliefs represent that the earth has a certain shape and so are true if the earth is that way. But, whatever shape the earth has, it isn’t both round and flat. So not both beliefs are true. Of course, there is no problem admitting that the different people *have**

different beliefs about the earth, but admitting this isn't the same as admitting that the different beliefs are both *true*.

What if some people have good reasons for believing one way and other people have good reasons for believing another—doesn't this mean that the thing is true for some people and not for others? No. Here's a silly, but dramatic, example: Perhaps some people have good reasons for thinking that you are an alien (they saw you emerge from a spaceship), while you have good reasons for thinking that you are not (you remember the event as a hoax). But having reasons is not the same as having truth: Maybe the event was a hoax—but maybe you are an alien and hoax memories were implanted when you took human form! The reasons do not themselves *make* "You are an alien" true or false; rather, truth or falsity depends on the relation between what the statement says and the way things are—on whether you are, in fact, an alien. Reasons do not *make* truth, they are rather part of the process by which we *discover* it.

What if there is no test that can decide for or against some statement—doesn't this mean its truth or falsity depends on opinion? No. Suppose the universe goes on forever, and consider the following claim,

There is, on some planet in the universe, a rock formation that is an exact duplicate of the Venus de Milo.

One can imagine exploring planets that are not too distant from our own. However, if the universe goes on forever (as we are assuming), it seems impossible to explore them all. In exploring the planets, we might discover that the statement is true, but its truth or falsity might remain forever unknown. In this case, should we conclude that the statement isn't true or false, or that its truth or falsity is up to the individual? What people *think* about its truth or falsity may vary from person to person. But the truth or falsity doesn't vary. The statement says something perfectly clear about the way things are. It is true if things are that way and false if they are not. As it turns out, our power to represent with language outruns our ability to discover with spaceships (or whatever). And along with the ability to represent beyond what we can discover comes the potential for truth and falsity beyond that which we can know.

What if different people mean different things by the same words—if the same words represent the world being different ways, won't they be true for one person and false for another? Good point! This forces a certain clarification of our thesis: There is room to distinguish a *sentence* from *what one says* with a particular use of it. So, e.g., your use of "I am hungry" says that you are hungry, and another person's use of it says that they are hungry. If you use the sentence just before lunch, and they use it just after lunch, it is likely that what you say is true and what they say is false. Therefore it isn't the *sentence*, taken apart from its uses, which is true or false, but what one says with

particular uses, that is true or false.² If what you say (the *proposition* you express) with a particular use of “I am hungry” correctly represents the way things are, then the truth of what you say (the proposition you express) doesn’t vary from person to person; for its truth is a matter of correspondence between what you say and the world; if you say it, what you say is true just in case, as a matter of fact, you are hungry. And, similarly, if meanings shift across uses—if one person uses words one way, and another uses them a different way—it may be that different propositions are expressed. But the truth or falsity of the different propositions is a matter of correspondence, and so does not vary from person to person. Above, I have used the relatively vague term, “statement.” Properly understood, though, our thesis is this: The truth or falsity of a proposition—of what one says with a use of a sentence—does not vary from person to person. Given this, propositions aren’t true for one person and false for another, and the point about different meanings for words doesn’t count against our thesis.

What about religious propositions—aren’t they obviously true for some people and false for others? No—at least not obviously! Perhaps the difficulty is one about verification: It seems impossible to find a test that could decide, for everyone, whether certain religious propositions are true or false. Say there is no test. Then the situation for religion is like the situation for Venus-de-Milo rock formations. As before, though, a problem about *knowledge* isn’t the same as a problem about *truth*. Standard religious propositions like the one expressed by “God created the heavens and the earth” represent things as being a certain way. The propositions are true just in case things are in fact that way. So their truth and falsity is no different from truth and falsity for any others.

What about taste—doesn’t truth or falsity for propositions about taste obviously vary from person to person? No—at least not obviously! Consider, e.g., “Nose rings are cool.” If it is indeed a matter of taste whether nose rings are cool, then a use of “Nose rings are cool” should come with an understood “I think...” (or something of the sort) so that “Nose rings are cool” is like “I am hungry.”³ One use says that one person or group likes nose rings, where another use may say that another person or group likes them. But the proposition expressed by “(I think) nose rings are cool” is true if and only if it correctly represents the way things are—and this is not something that varies from person to person. Similarly, for other propositions expressed by uses of “Nose rings are cool,” and for other propositions about taste.

What about moral propositions—aren’t at least these true for some people and false for others? No—at least not obviously! In this case, the worry might be like the worry about taste or like the worry about religion. On the one hand, if ethical claims like

² Perhaps what one says with any use (in a single language) of a sentence like “Dogs are mammals” is true, and if what one says with all a sentence’s uses is true (false) it is natural to say that the sentence is itself true (false); but, plausibly, this truth or falsity is parasitic on truth or falsity for what one says with the uses.

³ If it doesn’t come with an understood “I think...” (or something of the sort), then we aren’t expressing a matter of taste—as we have supposed.

“Murder is morally wrong” are supposed to be a matter of taste, then their uses come with an assumed “I think...” (or something of the sort). But then, as before, truth or falsity for the corresponding propositions does not vary from person to person. Different uses may express different propositions, but the individual propositions aren’t true for some people and false for others. Perhaps, then, ethical claims aren’t supposed to be a matter of taste, and the worry is about knowledge—say about discovering God’s commands. In this case, though, it’s not clear why the problem about knowledge is supposed to be a problem about truth. Consider the Venus-de-Milo case.

But doesn’t the correspondence thesis promote intolerance and bigotry—and isn’t it therefore best to reject it? Presumably, the idea is that “true for me but not for you” removes potential for error, so that each person and culture has as much “right” to their beliefs as any other. This raises many issues. I’ll make just a couple of comments about motivation: First, do not mistake the claim that truth and falsity don’t vary from person to person, with the claim that any one group is justified in their beliefs, or that some one group knows what the truth is. So, e.g., scientific groups can disagree about some claim while respecting and understanding the process by which other groups come to their conclusions—all the while insisting that not all the groups can be right. Second, tolerance is a virtue which has its application precisely where there is disagreement and error. Insofar as “true for me but not for you” removes the potential for error, it removes the occasion for tolerance. But maybe it would be best to admit error and to promote the virtue.⁴

But isn’t there another account of truth—one that would make sense of “true for me but not for you”? There are approaches to truth other than the correspondence theory. The correspondence theory fits most naturally with a common-sense (*realist*) view of the world according to which the world exists externally to us and independently of what we think. So, e.g., on a realist view, there may have been rocks and trees before there were people, and there might be rocks and trees after people are gone. But there are other (*anti-realist*) theories of the world which typically make the world itself somehow dependent on minds—and typically come with alternate approaches to truth (these views are a topic for a course in metaphysics). I think most people who say that such-and-such is “true for me but not for you” do not have in mind these sophisticated theories. More likely, either they mean to say something about belief or justification—and so do not say what they mean, or they mean to say something about truth which, as it turns out, does not mesh with their overall view of the world. To be clear and consistent, people in this position should give up saying “true for me but not for you.”

⁴ It isn’t clear that “true for me but not for you” removes all potential for disagreement and error. When someone says that such-and-such is “true for me but not for you” is *this* supposed to be a correspondence truth, or is it supposed to be true for them and false for you? If it is supposed to be a correspondence truth, then there is room to disagree. If it is only supposed to be true for them, then you still disagree! (Think about it.)