Why Progressives Need a (Minimally) Realist Theory of Truth

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by Darren Hibbs

What is being asserted when one claims that a statement, proposition, or belief is “true”? This is the central question that concerns philosophers who investigate the nature of “truth.” It is important to distinguish this question from the question of whether we ought to believe that a statement, proposition, or belief is true. The latter question is about the nature of justification and knowledge. Consider the distinction between the following questions:

1. What does it mean to assert that the proposition “The moon is smaller than the sun” is “true”?
2. Is the moon smaller than the sun?

To supply an answer to question (1), one must appeal to some general theory about the nature of truth rather than determining whether the particular claim about the moon is true. An answer to question (1) can be supplied without having any clue about the correct answer to the second question. To know what the term “true” means does not entail that one knows the truth-value of particular truth claims (other than statements about the meaning of “truth”). In answering question (2), one would appeal to various kinds of evidence to determine whether there are sufficient grounds for believing that the moon is smaller than the sun. Although questions (1) and (2) are different in kind, some philosophers have argued that the concept of “truth” in general cannot be understood in isolation from questions about the epistemic procedures employed to determine whether a belief is justified. That is, you cannot get a satisfactory answer to question (1) without appealing to the epistemic procedures employed in answering questions of type (2). Those who take this view offer what is known as an “epistemic” theory of truth. My aim is to illustrate a logical problem for those who employ a radical version of epistemic truth in conjunction with advocacy for societal change. The remainder of the paper will answer the following questions in order:
1. What are traditional philosophical accounts of truth like?
2. What is the radical version of epistemic truth and how does it depart from these traditional theories?
3. What is the problem with adopting the radical version of epistemic truth in conjunction with political or social advocacy?
4. What adjustment to the radical theory of epistemic truth is required to avoid the problem?

There are numerous competing theories that address the question of what it means for a proposition to be true. The most commonly held theory of truth throughout the Western philosophical tradition has been the correspondence theory of truth. According to a simple version of the theory, propositions are assertions about some portion of reality and a proposition is true if and only if it accurately represents the relevant portion of reality. On this view, truth consists in the agreement between the content of a proposition and the way the world is. Consider the earlier claim “The moon is smaller than the sun.” According to the correspondence theory, this proposition amounts to a mental or conceptual representation of reality. To say that the statement is true is to say that the representation accurately portrays some objective features of the world—namely that there are such things as the moon and the sun, and that the respective sizes of the objects are different in the right way. Prior to the 20th Century, most philosophers thought the theory was so obvious that no defense was required. It seemed uncontroversial to claim that human beings form judgments about the world and those judgments are true or false depending upon whether the world is accurately represented by those judgments.

An alternative to the correspondence theory is the coherence theory of truth. According to the coherence theory, to say that a proposition is true is to say that it coheres with some specified set of propositions. Coherence theorists differ on the proper understanding of the term “cohere.” Some proponents define coherence as consistency. A proposition is true if and only if it is logically consistent with the specified set of propositions. A proposition “p” is consistent with a specified set of propositions if “p” and all the members of the set can be true simultaneously. Thus, to assert that “The moon is smaller than the sun” is true means that there are no other beliefs in the specified set that would have to be false if the statement about the moon were regarded as true. Others equate coherence with entailment. On this view, a true proposition is entailed by the specified set of propositions. For example, if I believe that “If P is true, then Q is true” and I also believe that “P is true”, “Q is true” is entailed by the first two beliefs. On this account, to say that a proposition is true is just to say it logically follows from the propositions that make up the specified set. Both explanations describe coherence as a logical relationship among a set of propositions. Coherence theorists also disagree about how to specify the set of propositions that provide the test for coherence. According to one view, the specified set of propositions includes those propositions that would be believed by human beings at the completion of a properly conducted inquiry. According to a second view, the specified set of propositions includes those propositions that would be believed by an omniscient being. Both of these methods describe the specified set as an idealized set in the sense that the propositions that are included have a special status compared to propositions that are not included; namely, that they have been justified by either the best inquiry we can conduct or they are believed to be true by an omniscient being.
Another alternative to the correspondence theory is the pragmatic account of truth. Pragmatists argue that true propositions are those that are useful in practice. But what does it mean to say that a belief is useful or successful in practice? Pragmatists offer different accounts of the type of utility that marks a true belief, but they generally agree that true beliefs are beneficial from a practical point of view. True beliefs are those that allow us to successfully organize, explain, and predict our experiences. Some pragmatists add that true beliefs are characterized by their resistance to experiential falsification. Thus, the pragmatist argues that truth is a matter of experiential validation and the latter is a matter of measuring the practical utility of beliefs.

There are other theories of truth that have been proposed and there are several variations within the correspondence, coherence, and pragmatic categories. But this brief sketch of the major theories provides a summary of what a theory of truth is supposed to accomplish. A common feature of the alternatives to the correspondence theory is that neither the coherence nor the pragmatic theorists explain truth as a relation between a proposition and an independent world existing apart from those propositions. Critics of the correspondence theory typically argue that the theory fails to adequately account for the nature of “correspondence.” Propositions and extra-mental entities are so radically different that symmetry between the two is impossible to articulate. For example, a proposition employing concepts of the moon and the sun is a fundamentally different kind of thing than the physical objects it represents. How can an arrangement of concepts “accurately portray” physical objects? If the precise nature of the correspondence relation cannot be satisfactorily explained, then the central component of the theory is deeply flawed.

The difficulties with the correspondence theory led coherentists and pragmatists to drop the appeal to extra-mental reality in explaining the nature of truth. Although this step is a significant departure from the correspondence view, it does not amount to the rejection of the notion of objective reality or objective truth. For example, the coherence and pragmatic theories of truth may not appeal directly to the notion of objective reality to explain truth, but there is nothing in these theories that rules out appealing to objective reality to explain why there could be only one coherent set of beliefs or why progress seems to occur in the pragmatic sense of the usefulness of our beliefs. However, there are more radical critiques of the correspondence theory that explicitly challenge not only the truth-making role of “objective reality” in the theory, but the coherence of the notion of “objective reality” itself. The view that there is an objective, mind-independent reality or fact is typically called “realism.” I am interested in a specific account of truth that accompanies critiques of realism and the logical consequences of adopting a view of this sort. I will now describe one such theory and then explain why those who adopt it undercut their ability to argue for the view that some states of affairs should be favored over others.

Richard Rorty has criticized just about every concept that is either directly or indirectly associated with support for the correspondence theory of truth. His analyses of truth and related concepts have created an ongoing debate between supporters and critics. It is Rorty’s particular comments about the nature of truth that I wish to discuss. According to Rorty, when we come to believe that some proposition “p” is true, we do so as a result of following some procedure that leads us to accept “p” rather than reject it. Let’s call the procedure we follow an “Epistemic Procedure” (EP). There are many different EPs that can be employed to determine whether a proposition ought to be accepted as true (observing the world, a sophisticated scientific inquiry,
consulting experts, reading astrological charts, praying, etc.). However, there is no objective procedure for ranking EPs. For any advocate of a given EP—let’s say EP1—their verdict about the status of other EPs (EP2, EP3, and so on) will necessarily be a product of the method particular to EP1. That is, there is no transcendent perspective “outside” of all EPs that allows us to objectively rank them, since to rank them you will have to employ some particular EP. It follows that any ranking system of EPs will inevitably reflect the method of the EP used to establish the rankings. Thus, to claim that a particular proposition is true just means that it is endorsed by some way of thinking about what one ought to believe. Since particular truth claims are products of EPs and EPs cannot be ranked, the truth claims that follow from the EPs cannot be objectively ranked in terms of their plausibility either.

Given this account of what it means to assert that a proposition is true, Rorty is logically committed to what I will call the Parity Thesis (PT). What does it mean to be logically committed to a proposition? Assume that someone holds the following two propositions to be true: (1) All A are B, and (2) All B are C. Someone committed to both (1) and (2) is logically committed to: (3) All A are C. PT follows in this way from Rorty’s view about putative “truths” and the EPs that generate them. PT is a form of relativism that holds all truth claims to be equally plausible, valid, or justified. According to PT, there is no way to objectively rank assertions in terms of their probability of being true because no claim has a privileged status over any other claim. No claim possesses a privileged status since all claims originate from EP’s that have no privileged status.

What is a progressive and why should they reject PT and the view of truth that generates it? Although the term “progressive” has an established meaning, I will use the term in a more expansive sense to refer to an advocate for change in political or social arrangements where the proposed change is described as an “improvement” over the current state of affairs. The stipulated meaning of the term does not necessarily relate to specifically liberal or conservative proposals. However, conservatives are unlikely to support PT since they typically hold some propositions to be objectively true. Rorty and some of his followers are progressives in the sense that they are advocates for a form of liberal democracy free of coercion as a superior form of social arrangement. According to Rorty, such an arrangement provides a congenial environment for open-minded discussion about the issues that concern us as human beings and, as such, it is superior to arrangements that do not.

What is the problem with accepting PT if one is a progressive? First, there is the problem of explaining what could motivate a progressive to propose a change if they are logically committed to PT. Suppose that a progressive suggests that we alter some aspect of our society in order to improve conditions. Let’s call the current state of affairs (A). The progressive proposes that we make specific changes to (A) in order to bring about state of affairs (B) where (B) is offered as an improvement over (A). If PT is accepted, (B) is not an improvement over (A) since no truth claim can be established as objectively true. (B) may be offered as better given a certain EP, but (A) may also be offered as better on some other EP, and neither EP is objectively better than the other. If all states of affairs are justified by some EP, there can be no motivation for the view that we ought to become active in trying to bring about one state of affairs over any other state of affairs. Second, the progressive PT advocate cannot justify the claim that their proposals, if adopted, would constitute an improvement. If (A) and (B) cannot be objectively ranked in terms
of warrant, justification, or plausibility, then one cannot argue that either (A) or (B) is more reasonable or more justified than the alternative. Again, (B) may be justified given one EP, while (A) may be justified by some other EP, but neither EP is objectively better than the other. Holding a thoroughly relativist view of truth eliminates both the motivation for progressive proposals and the hope of justifying the claim that some states of affairs are objectively better than others.\(^{14}\)

The denial of PT is necessary in order to justify progressive proposals that aim to improve society. But what follows from the denial of PT? Rejecting PT does not entail that a full-blooded realism must be accepted. In fact, one can concede to the relativist that “truth” must be understood as a function of methods of justification or verification. I do not think this concession is necessary within the context of a discussion about “truth” in general. I only make the concession here to introduce a modest form of objectivism that avoids the problems associated with PT. At a minimum, denying PT entails that some propositions are better candidates for objective truths than others. This view requires the supposition that some EPs are objectively better than others at producing candidates for objective truths. This supposition amounts to the commonsense claim that some methods of inquiry are objectively better than other methods. Note that the supposition of objective rankings for EPs does not entail that we must be certain beyond any doubt that our ranking of EPs is objectively true. In other words, in order to pursue objective truth, we do not have to presuppose that we already possess it in terms of the methods we use to seek it. In fact, the pursuit of objective truth requires that we avoid a level of overconfidence that may prevent desirable adjustments to our methods of inquiry in light of new evidence or arguments. This view is a “Minimally Realist” account in the sense that it presupposes an objective ranking of EPs and their products—even though we may be wrong about how the ranking ought to be ordered at any given time. This view is compatible with the correspondence, coherence, and pragmatic theories of truth.\(^{15}\) It is compatible with each because none of these theories require us to reject an objective ranking of EPs. It avoids the PT problem in the following way. If Rorty is challenged about why liberal democracy is superior to other forms of social arrangements, he cannot appeal to the superiority of the EP that produced his belief since he has already stated that his EP is no better than others. If he believed that there is an objective ranking of EPs, he would not be facing a question about why he is advocating a view produced by an EP that is no better than any other. The problem, ultimately, is about the internal logical coherence of advocating a proposal for improvement when saddled with the theory that the methods that produced it are on par with any other. Merely including the belief that there is an objective order of EPs deflects this type of objection.\(^{16}\)

I have tried to provide a general account of what a theory of truth is about and explain why a specific epistemic account of truth entails the Parity Thesis. The result is a form of relativism that delegitimizes progressive proposals for societal advancement. A modest proposal is that we ought to reject the Parity Thesis and the account of truth that supports it and adopt the view that some propositions are better candidates for being objectively true because they are produced by objectively better epistemic procedures.

Notes

2. Throughout the paper, the term “objective” will denote something mind-independent—that is, something that is true regardless of our beliefs about it.

3. For the Coherence Theory, see S, pp. 103–110.


5. See note 1.


7. The proper interpretation of Rorty has been contested at every stage of his career. A typical example of another author who agrees with my interpretation of Rorty is Haack, Susan, Evidence and Inquiry: A Pragmatist Reconstruction of Epistemology (Prometheus, 2009), pp. 239–261. For Rorty’s response to the interpretation that I offer, see Brandom, Robert, Rorty and His Critics (Blackwell, 2000), especially Bigrami, Akeel, “Is Truth a Goal of Inquiry?: Rorty and Davidson on Truth”, pp. 242–261. For a bibliography of secondary works on Rorty (and a balanced article on the general character of his thought), see the “Richard Rorty” entry in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy by Ramberg, Bjorn <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rorty/>.

8. The journal Contemporary Pragmatism has served as a venue for discussion among critics and supporters of Rorty’s version of pragmatism. There are many articles in the journal that are supportive of Rorty along relevant lines for the topic of this paper. For a very recent example, see Malachowski, Alan “Making a Difference in Cultural Politics: Rorty's Interventions” v. 8 (1) 2011, pp. 85–95.


10. ORT, pp. 23–25.

11. Ibid.

12. PT may be challenged on the grounds that it is self-referentially incoherent. PT is a claim about our epistemic predicament. If PT is regarded as true, it must be either true in the sense that a given EP sanctions it, or it must be true in the stronger sense that it is an objective truth. If PT is regarded as true in accordance with its own standard of truth (the first option), then PT is no better than its denial since there are other equally valid EPs that entail a rejection of PT. If PT is regarded as objectively true, then PT refutes itself, since there are some truths that are objective. In short, PT is either a self-refuting attempt to state what is objectively the case or it is just one view about the status of truth claims that is no better than its denial or any other account of truth. For a discussion of similar “recoil” arguments against relativism, see Boghossian, Paul, Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism (Oxford University Press, 2006).


14. These are not the only objections to PT. There is also the difficulty of providing a satisfactory explanation of the nature of false propositions when there is no objective ranking. But this is a problem within the context of the nature of truth in general and goes well beyond the scope of this paper.

15. Although Rorty claimed to be a pragmatist, some pragmatists argue that his views are not consistent with the pragmatic tradition due to the problem discussed in this paper. See Haack (note 7), pp. 239–261.
16. Note that this proposal is strictly about the internal logical structure of a belief system. It is not about the epistemic question of how one can be sure that a given EP is superior to others.