

Report of meeting on 18th July 2013

The subject for discussion was "What is Truth?"

From our general discussion many themes emerged and were developed. These covered the various types of truth, the theories about truth, the difficulty of understanding truth and how we use or misuse truth. The comments from the meeting are grouped below within themes (not necessarily accurately).

Truth theories: -

Correspondence theory

For any given truth there must be a truth maker- a "something in the world which makes it the case, that serves as an ontological ground for its truth" (Armstrong)

Truth is a corroborated belief

Truth is a belief in corroborated facts

Knowledge is a justifiable true belief

The step between belief and truth is justification

Identity theory

A true proposition is identical to a fact (Moore 1902 and Russell 1904)

The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth

Coherence theory

A belief is true if and only if it is part of a coherent system of beliefs. (Joachim)

Pragmatist theory

Truth is the end of enquiry. Truth is satisfactory to believe. (Peirce)

The pragmatist theory is reminiscent of the eastern idea of enlightenment

Semantic theory (Tarski's theory)

Truth for a sentence is determined by certain properties of its constituents; in particular, by properties of reference and satisfaction.

Semantics and some other theories seem to be more about language use than truth

Realism

The world exists objectively, independently of the ways we think about it or describe it. Our thoughts and claims are about that world.

Truth is an abstract noun

Truth is independent of people's opinions

Truth always comes out on top

Absolute truth in Hinduism includes God, the scriptures and the immortal soul

Anti-realism

Truth is not a solely objective matter, independent of us or our thoughts. Instead truth is constrained by our abilities to verify, and is thus constrained to our epistemic situation (Dummett)

True is an adjective used with a noun such as belief

Truth is in the eye of the beholder or ear of the hearer

Truth is perception

It is about your perception

Truth is in the perception (I heard it on the BBC)

Honesty is subjective, a result of life's experiences

We all have our own truth and re-evaluate it every day as a result of experiences
There are truths. Facts and truths are different
Truth is accuracy, reality, perception
Not "The Truth" but "Truth"

Redundancy theory

In either its speech act or meaning form, there is no property of truth. (Strawson)
There is no truth. There is only perception. (Gustave Flaubert, French novelist)
I don't think there is such a thing as truth
I don't believe there is an absolute truth; it is different for each of us
There is perception and fact, but no truth

Different kinds of truth: -

Necessary truth – must be true
Contingent truth – depends on the facts
Analytic truth - following necessarily
Conceptual truth - true by definition
Synthetic a priori truth - where justification does not rely upon experience

Different versions of the truth

Different sorts of truth: scientific - which may be later disproved, legal - which depends on corroboration, moral truth and political truth. All truth is relative.

It is hard for magistrates and judges to find the truth amongst the facts

There is factual truth and corroboratory truth.

We have to have something we believe is the truth, especially in criminality

Some handle truth at different levels

There is no such thing as justice, only decisions

Philosophical terms explained in the meeting

Ontology ... to do with our assumptions about how the world is made up and the nature of things

Epistemology ... to do with our beliefs about how one might discover knowledge about the world

Truth and children

Young children are more likely to believe they are being told the truth

All children inherently know what is right or wrong, as we get older we look for the truth in everything

Grandchildren know that Google is where to look for truth

Truth and morality

I try to be true to myself, not to be coerced into anything I don't want to do

Truth is important in a relationship

Truth and belief rely on trust

Most people try to be honest. Truth leads to goodness

When you act or speak the truth, there is a goodness that you feel

We need to question. The danger is when we don't ask questions.

We may be happier not knowing, but consider the holocaust.

Important to have suspicion

Truth and Lies

People bend the truth to fit their requirements

The truth depends which side you are on. History differs according to the writer.

All men/women are liars. Lying to obtain what we want is a weakness in the human race
Is it possible to say something that isn't true without telling a lie?
White lies cause no harm (Father Christmas, you look good in that)

Truth and the media

We choose to read a newspaper that reflects our own beliefs
The media is prone to deletion, generalisation and distortion. The press could only be free with no advertising
In Google the information may be from rap artists or university dons

Truth and politics

We have choices. We should ask questions of those standing in elections.
We put forward democracy as the best system of government, but Egypt has shown it doesn't always work
All politicians are liars
How can we say politicians are dishonest when we don't know them?
We can't make assumptions about them all from media stories

People used as examples

Clinton – did he really believe he didn't have sex?
Prime Minister and cigarette packets – was he lying about not being influenced by lobbyists?
Hitler - a classic example of the truth comes out

The difficulties in understanding truth

How important is it to know the truth?
How would we know if we had found truth?
Our senses are totally inadequate to comprehend it
Truth doesn't always mirror reality
A cynic sees gullibility, propaganda and manipulation
We are no nearer to understanding truth
Truth is relevant to wondering. It is essential in life to wonder
Truth is purity of mind. The mind is a blank piece of paper

Book recommended by Christopher Langdon, our group leader. Introducing Philosophy by Robert C Solomon