

Truth Too Fails

Nowadays most people, apart from philosophers, find the statement ‘truth depends on evidence’ obvious.

The orthodox view of most philosophers is that ‘truth is evidence-transcendent.’

Who is right?

Most people, after seeing that the sky is blue, they hold that p_1 =‘The sky is blue’ is true; if they like the pizza, they hold that p_2 =‘The pizza is good’ is true; if they have to walk and they don’t see anything suspicious around them, they hold p_3 =‘There is solid ground around me’ is true; for what they heard to be proved by science, and for what they too can somehow have experienced personally they hold that p_4 =‘The Earth is round’ is true.

In all cases the people think of having evidence enough for holding what they say as true, and they hold it as a truth.

Philosophers, however, are traditionally averse to accepting such truths. Their argument is that truth is independent of how we justify it: our justification of truth could be mistaken, but the “truth of the world” cannot be mistaken. A theory about the world is true or false independently of our justification.

Nevertheless, the linguistic phenomenology shows that most people² use terms ‘true’ or ‘truth’ when they have justification. Moreover it seems that people think it’s not right to hold anything as true if there is not a justification³.

By contrast, philosophers use terms ‘true’ or ‘truth’ in a sense which seems to be independent of a notion of justification, but just related to some metaphysical state of affair of the world. It is usually held that truth is an agreement between an existing metaphysical world and some suitable language such as the natural languages, or the language of the

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²And probably philosophers too when they are not up to professional discussions.

³I am not going to explain the details about what I think the right justification should consist of.

thought, or an alleged metaphysical object-language. These agreement would therefore be independent of the human activity, and this view of truth normally leads to hold truth as an eternal and infallible object. This view is called the *eternalist* view of truth.

On the other hand, if truth depended on evidence, then new evidence could prove us wrong and therefore the truth would fail; therefore truth would amount to being a function of time. I call this view the *evidentialist* view of truth⁴.

Who is right?

I think that the eternalist view is already problematic because it requires the existence of a linguistic world and of a metaphysical extra-linguistic world, being both independent of the human mind, and this is surely not the only viable weltanschauung, but let's grant this was the only possibility, in order to deepen the aspects of the comparison between the evidentialist and the eternalist view of truth.

As most people nowadays, I too am a fallibilist. More precisely, presumably because I make a lot of mistakes of *any* kind, I am global fallibilist⁵: we could change the endorsement of any belief, being it justified at any quantity (before we find the mistake in holding our belief).

By adhering to the evidentialist view, I claim that being fallibilist implies that truth is fallible. If not clear, it is straightforward to show: according to the evidentialist view of truth, any statement p can be rightly held as a truth if and only if there is justification, but our justification is fallible, therefore *truth is fallible*.

This result sounds unpalatable *prima facie*.⁶

But let's now analyse some aspects of the eternalist view: taking the position that truth is evidence-transcendent then we couldn't say that p_1 , p_2 , p_3 or p_4 are true.

This goes too much against the common sense, I think. The reason of this is because, by

⁴This evidentialist view would also be a temporalist view of truth, according to which propositions can change truth-value over time.

⁵Fallibilism is often explained as the view according to which false-but-justified beliefs are possible. This reading is however affected by the orthodox view of truth: false is seen to be eternal (therefore also when a belief is justified), and not just after the justification for the belief as failed. Global fallibilism implies that it applies also to mathematical knowledge.

⁶It is unpalatable because mistakes are always not pleasant to be found and something free from that possibility would appear nicer. However, believing that we—fallible beings—can access to infallible truths is not realistic, and therefore this belief is likely to give us less nice consequences.

giving an example for p_1 , we might believe to see a blue sky, but an evil devil could have deluded us and *actually* the sky is blue.

Apparently the same evil devil could delude us also in our judgment about the pizza (p_2). Even without invoking the supernatural, we may have some justified belief that the ground around us is solid (p_3), but that could be just the result of a hologram, for instance. Therefore we think can walk forth, but *in reality* we are bound to fall: we could have not said that p_3 =‘There is solid ground around me’ is true.

What account would a supporter of the evidentialist view of truth give in such an instance? At first there was evidence to make true that the near ground was solid, afterwards there was evidence that the ground was not solid; therefore at first, at a certain instant t_1 , p_3 was true and afterwards, at a later instant t_2 , p_3 is false.

Let’s consider p_4 . In the fifth century BCE, most people would say that p_4 is false: the Earth is flat. Now we know that p_4 is true, very few philosophers dispute this. Moreover, the Earth is round now as well as it was round in the fifth century! Nevertheless, if fallibilism implies that a mistake about p_4 is still currently possible⁷, then we couldn’t even say that the Earth is round now⁸. Philosophers too couldn’t say it, but they do say it – creating some tension, if not a plain contradiction.

But if the eternalist account does not work satisfactorily, how can the Earth have been flat in the fifth century BCE and be round at present?

This is how an “evidentialist” would answer: in the fifth century BCE there was evidence to say that the Earth is flat, now there is evidence to say that the Earth is round now and was round *also* in the fifth century⁹; thus the truth of the fifth century BCE has failed.

In the 5th century BCE, people believed that the Earth “really” is flat and will remain flat, therefore p_4 was false, p_4 is false at time 5th century BCE. In the 21st century CE, people believed that the Earth “really” is round and was round, therefore p_4 is true at time 21st century CE. It is no contradiction: contradiction is holding contrasting beliefs at the same – here it’s just a revision of beliefs of two theories applying to the same temporal

⁷Fallibilism does not imply that such mistake is probable, but just possible. Today as well in the past.

⁸If needed, appealing to a Cartesian devil is always an easy but efficacious metaphysical tool.

⁹For many other objects, however, there is evidence to show that the object has changed shaped.

domain. Besides, the present theory about the shape of the Earth is the true one as we have hugely more evidence than in 5th century BCE.

This methodological practice addressed by a different view of truth is no surprise for a scientist, I think. Consider, for instance, the case of a paleobiologist with a couple of theories about the dinosaurs; he finds a lot of¹⁰ evidence that supports the first theory, and then he concludes that the first theory is true; however some subsequent evidence happens to falsify the first theory and to largely support the second theory. He then concludes that the second theory is true. Clearly the latter theory applies to the dinosaurs even when he was holding the first theory to be true – but only since evidence proved so.

Once again, philosophers would argue that we couldn't say that the first theory is true, nor the second, for truth is eternal and it cannot fail: truth refers to the “all-or-nothing agreement” with the “real” state of affairs, which is given at any time. My simple reply is that such an *idealized* notion of truth would be totally contrary to how the people use the notion of truth, since we could never be certain of being in agreement with metaphysical world: fallibilism implies that *we could never say that anything is true* – even in a realist context! The way scientists ascribe scientific truths is independent of their metaphysical views – if they have any.

Another unacceptable consequence of the eternalist view is that we couldn't even say that someone is lying, for lying means uttering a falsehood, but we could never be sure of having accessed to the metaphysical realm containing truths and falsehoods. It might happen that we utter a truth or a falsehood, but we couldn't know it; can this interpretation of truth, where we can't know whether we speak the truth or the falsehood, be acceptable? Clearly not to me, but it's always been so for the philosophers.

I could speculate two sociological reasons for this mistake: a world with absolute certainties is an easier world to handle, and this is what the humans have always needed and aimed at. In the past, the hypothesis of a god and a devil was usually taken as an eternal infallible evidence-transcendent objective truth; this hypothesis was not dismissable for it

¹⁰My personal account of (prescriptive) truth holds that a belief can be held as conclusive belief, i.e., as a *true* belief, when the evidence regarding the belief is exhausted. In the case of infinite domain of evidence, the exhaustion is a pragmatic issue (as well as the infinite size of a domain is). More in general beliefs will be substituted by degrees of belief, and truth-values by degrees of truth.

has lead us to conclude that say that p_6 ="Tomorrow there will be rain (with chance 100We take p_6 to be true, but then the next day it happens to be just sunny. There could be this case: it has probability 0, but it is possible. It is as likely as ending up in a heaven without sky, but equally possible. The evidence of the sunshine makes p_6 false, but there was everything for holding p_6 as true – yesterday.

These two last cases of p_5 and p_6 are not qualitatively different from p_3 (the solid ground around me): that too was a claim about future experience, and we wanted to hold it true. We appealed to the evidential justification we have more than to some purported metaphysical properties, and this has always proved to be a winning strategy, more than the infinite candidates of metaphysical systems.

Therefore I think that the majority of people is not wrong on how they use the concept of truth: seconding the common sense it shows how to make a general account of truth that keep on being the most sensible also for cases that were uncertain previously¹⁴. A remarkable example can be done in the philosophy of science: it is an issue whether the Newtonian theory of gravity is (now) true or false or less true than the Einstenian one. The solution is somewhat pragmatic just depending on the evidence that we consider: the Einstenian one is in general truer as more evidence supports it in general, but for some domain of evidence the experimental fit is similar; however, if we consider the evidence of the all universe then we have infinitely more evidence for the Einstenian theory, making the Newtonian theory false¹⁵.

The case of a domain of finite possible evidence is more sophisticated, but its “solution” strenghtens also to the infinite case: if truth depends on evidence, and there is a given finite set of evidence, then the truth-value is definite. Correct. On the other hand, fallibilism implies that what we hold as evidence is fallible too—nothing but a theory that was previously ascribed as true. But then the “given” set of evidence is given only at a given time, varying in general, making the comparison between the theory and an

¹⁴Quine stated ‘Science is a continuation of common sense, and it continues the common-sense expedient of swelling ontology to simplify theory’. I am for following this natural strategy.

¹⁵However, if some evidence wouldn't be explained even by the Einstenian theory could be considered approximately true. Truth therefore would be also dependent on the context by the considered domain of evidence: for example, according to the domain of a book of fiction it's true that ‘Santa brought presents to every child.’

unlimited set of evidence in general, and making the need of degrees of truth depending on time in general¹⁶.

I conclude by the last simple thoughts: if truth ought not to depend on evidence, then p could be true having evidence pro or against it alike. Judges shouldn't look for the evidence then and there would be a total methodological anarchy about truth. If truth depended on how things are metaphysically then it would depend on something that has appeared so useless as a mere myth. Such truth, in fact, would be the agreement between a language and the metaphysical world; however fallibilism implies that the infallible access to know how the metaphysical world is a myth.

It would be absolutely irrelevant to use truth independently of the actual possibility of its conclusive justification. If some justification by evidence can fail, it doesn't mean that we should disregard evidence as a prescriptive criterion for truth, but it just means that we should look for more evidence, for having a more conclusive truth, and therefore less likely to fail and more likely to be eternal.¹⁷

Endorsing a metaphysical interpretation of truth would at least amount to making truth unusable for any practical purpose, therefore it is wrong.

¹⁶A practical example to visualize this: suppose your theory is that a password is \square , and then you press a key but what this key is is vague and not determinate. Then the truth-value won't be given and you'll have to generalize to time-dependent degrees of truth.

¹⁷Fallibility of truth doesn't obviously prevent a truth from eternity.