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## **Empiricism Versus Pragmatism : Truth Versus Results**

### **INTRODUCTION**

I wish to start this discussion with a cliché and a caveat. The cliché is that philosophy began in ancient Greece with Thales, at the dawn of the emergence of reason from the limbo of mythology and folklore. Thus, philosophy began in wonder and is love of wisdom. Philosophy is product of curiosity (and one might even say that philosophy itself is a curiosity), a relentless pursuit after profundity. But this cliché-repeated tirelessly in history of philosophy to endorse the hellenic origin of philosophy-faces a rebuttal in the light of contemporary advances in the sciences, though without dispelling the remarkable contributions of the hellenic thinkers.<sup>1</sup> It was a very humble period in retrospect, but for those who participated or partook, it must have had an exhilarating effect-even intoxicating, as the practice of the art of sophistry evidenced by sophists.

And, here is the point at which the caveat becomes important. Contrary to the idea peddled under various guises, this discussion is limited by the acknowledgement of the possibility that wisdom is unattainable and, consequently, that there is *NO* absolute truth. But, may be this presentation of the caveat is too pugnacious. What is intended here is to warn the reader concerning entertaining false expectations. For, in considering philosophy as love of wisdom, wisdom has often been equated with truth. The inaccuracy of such identity is shown clearly when one considers the possibility that, though it is valid to expect that truth may be the object of wisdom, one may be wise without knowing the truth.<sup>2</sup> It is in the light of the above cliché and caveat that the Socratic relentless questioning, of the beliefs of ancient Greece and the wisdom of the sophists, aimed at the delineation and determination of truth and falsehood, is to be considered.

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In a way, the 'history' of philosophy has remained faithful to the search for truth. In this search, so many issues have been raised, so many theories formulated. A question innocently formulated has generated paradoxical positions, answers and conclusions. Thus, what is truth? has remained one of the most daunting philosophical questions. By contrast, what is the truth? has been more easy to consider-even though, not without its own befuddling conundrums. And, in most cases, this latter question has been what philosophers have been considering when proposing theories of "truth". In other words, they have been concerned with defining the truth, rather than "truth", while they have thought they were defining *the* truth. Formulated this way, it might appear confusing, but what is intended is reference to the various theories of truth as attempts to define truth within specific contexts. But most philosophers who have considered truth have confused the one issue with the other. From idealism onwards, the situation has remained virtually the same. Thus, such theories and philosophies as rationalism, empiricism, positivism, scepticism and pragmatism, have all foundered on the same score.

Now, one may ask, why pit empiricism against pragmatism and truth against results? Are we suggesting they are mutually exclusive? And are we saying that the empiricist is concerned with truth while the pragmatist is not, but rather with results? To avoid misleading the reader, it should be stated right away that pragmatism is also concerned with truth, at least as much as empiricism. But pragmatism takes cognisance of the limitation of empiricism and hence constitutes an attempt to improve on the weaknesses of empiricism. It is concerned to denounce the rigidity that has attended the foundationalist strategies of empiricism, which have virtually become a straight-jacket and a debilitating doctrinaire account of truth. But in so doing, pragmatism seems to go to the opposite extreme and, in the process, overboard, by allowing practical consequences to supplant truth. Can we salvage pragmatism? That is, while acknowledging the truth that it enshrines, save it from itself, and in process save man-even if no absolute truths exist to be discovered in an eternal, transcendental realm, mankind cannot jettison the desire for truth in favour of results without imperilling the greater end of making results serve human survival goals.

This is not impossible. If one acknowledges the fact that pragmatism-a consequence of idealism, rationalism, empiricism, positivism and relativism in philosophy-is more or less the official philosophy in the

West, it then becomes an interesting issue to see whither man is moving, in the West. Thus, in this essay I examine the issue of truth from the perspective of empiricism and pragmatism. This is not without references to other theories, but the concern is to see how the ascendancy of pragmatism has affected the practice of science and philosophy. To carry out the project of this essay, I consider in Section I the attempts to define truth and the concern of philosophy with the search for truth. This does not mean that all the various theories of truth will be considered in detail. To undertake such a task would be an unnecessary review that has no dividend to yield concerning the issue at hand. Hence, the discussion will only show how the point broached above on defining "truth" and "the truth" has affected the usefulness of the various theories of truth. In Section II, I discuss the cleavage between rationalism and empiricism to drive home the point made in Section I. This section has the additional value of showing the limitations of the epistemic dualism that has pervaded Western philosophy, in spite of the diversity of theories propounded in its historical facets. In Section III, I consider the origins of relativism in philosophy and, consequently, in science. This I suggest, sets the stage for pragmatism which is discussed in Section IV. The last Section, V, considers the pragmatist's preference for usefulness, rather than truth and attempts to show the consequences for man in science and philosophy.

## I

### WHAT IS TRUTH?

There are so many dimensions to any philosophical issue or concept that perceptive student of philosophy would be worried when he or she encounters any simplistic account. However, at any point in time it is very difficult, if not impossible, to take into consideration all materials (particular and general) relevant to any problem. Thus, discussions proceed with unintended disregard of other issues that do not directly seem relevant. However, a proper realization of the limitation this fact imposes on philosophical discourse would have been most advantageous, but this seldom is the case, as we often exuberantly proclaim the minimal advances we make from our limited perspectives to be of monumental importance—often supposing, over-ambitiously that we have captured, once and for all, the essence of the issue and provided the solution to the problem on hand.

When one considers the concept of "truth" one finds that this consideration is of great value: What is truth? As a question this could be amenable to a triadic interpretation: i) taken as a request, it could be a demand for a definition of "truth". In this sense the demand is for an account of truth that can be applied in all circumstances- factual, formal, linguistic, metaphysical, moral, intuitive, etc.; ii) taken as request, again, the question may be contextually restricted to a particular kind of truth. That is, it could be a request for an account of 'the' truth; consequently, the question "what is truth?" can only be meaningful when taken within the particular context of discourse or inquiry; iii) finally, it could be taken as an absolutist requirement for the definition of *the* truth. This is the sense in which *the* truth is construed valuatively, by contrast to error, illusion, falsehood, deceit, deception, etc. By contrast to the first aspect of truth and the second aspect, the truth here lacks both a metaphysical and a contextual particularistic aspect. The metaphysical aspect expects that truth is univocal and can be arrested into a single definition which can then be waved like a magic and like Aristotle's much quoted definition:

To say of what is that it is not, or what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is and what is not that it is not, is true.<sup>4</sup>

The metaphysical nature of this definition is evidenced in any attempt to cash out the implications of what it says. While it is suggestive of operational, the trial run of such application is doomed by the variability of content. Also, it suggests that what "truthifies" a statement or affirmation is homogeneous; which suggestion is simplistic. These are just glimpses of issues discussed when mention is made of various theories of truth. This has a resemblance to the first account, but it is quite distinguishable from it because, while philosophers have usually started from (i) they have entered into (ii), and dissatisfied, they have proceeded to (iii) with the belief that this is what is requested. While each approach seem to have its merit, because it engages different aspects of truth (possibilities, that is), they have variously led into philosophical *cul de sacs*. This has resulted from the confusion of one enterprise and product with the others, and in the consideration of a contrast between truth and usefulness, a careful analysis of the theories of truth is indicated, particularly in so far as they have responded to one or more of the three issues raised here.

#### Ia.

If we start with Aristotle's answer to "what is truth?" which is

quoted above, one immediately moves in the obvious common sense realist direction that has been regarded as the Correspondence Theory. There is something intuitively obvious in Aristotle's formulation that it seems evident that it must be 'true'. It is at this point that danger signals loom large on the horizon.

Any theory of truth must address three basic issues: the facts, and here, facts will have to be construed in the broadest sense to cover various things, ranging from events-like the battle of Waterloo and Operation Desert Storm to the pain in the groin on the one hand, and religious, metaphysical, moral on the other, apart from purely scientific facts produced through the advancement of science and technology. In fact, it has to be acknowledged that in spite of the last group of 'facts' our usage, understanding of, and disposition toward truth, has remained unaltered. The second issue which a theory of truth must be cognizant of is our linguistic practice. This fact has been recognized by theorists, but its importance has been often misunderstood or emphasized wrongly. While Aristotle's definition of truth supposes that it is the "saying" that "truthifies", it has been easy to remark that it is not just the "saying" alone, or even, as such, that "truthifies" but the fact(s) as they are-this is the "it" of which Aristotle spoke.

Now, there would be no way to tether truths unless through the numerous "saying(s)" that we originate: the sayings could be verbal or it could be written, it could come in the form of an action and disposition to act or belief (a doxastic disposition). These are all conveyed in language. It is the linguistic aspect of truth referred to earlier. The "it" is indifferent to the saying or disposition or system we may build, whereas our saying(s) or description(s) and disposition(s) collapse or survive in virtue of their conformity to the "it" and its nature. That there was a battle of Waterloo is an "it", a "fact", our saying that "there was one" another "fact" - a linguistic statement that helps to tether the fact though. Whether we did make such a statement or not does not add or detract from the facticity of the "battle of Waterloo". This is because we are language users, communicating and codifying beings, capturing reality in language is the only advantaging factor the linguistic device serves.

The third basic issue a theory of truth has to address is the one broached in an implicit form above. It concerns our disposition or belief. It is the epistemic aspect, a cognitive component, which carries a

valuation, because belief or disposition to belief and knowledge (episteme) cannot hang incognito and in vacuo. Any affirmation of a proposition is loaded with this component; whether this is clearly stated or not is immaterial. Aristotle's definition can be considered reflexively in this regard. It carries the implication of an asseveration—that Aristotle does accept and believes the definition to be true and valid, and also an affirmation—that he wants others to consider his statement as true and accept or be disposed to positively act on its basis.

Usually, Aristotle's definition is viewed as the progenitor of the Correspondence Theory of truth. But, to my mind, it has carried the seed of other theories as well. It has also carried the seed of much more: it has led to the formulation of paradoxically enlightening and confusing theories, not just about truth, but also about knowledge. As in the case of 'knowledge', philosophers have led us up the path of a labyrinth of paradoxes in truth: a concept we use daily seems to become intractable all of a sudden once we enter into philosophy, while outside it we still use the concept and accept "truths" from compatriots unquestioningly. For example, ordinarily if I say I know that "Jamaica is a Caribbean country", there is hardly any dispute about my knowing, my knowledge and the truth of the affirmation. But when I am asked to explain what I mean by 'know', 'truth' and 'belief' out of context, but in philosophy, am totally lost and bewildered.

Ib.

Before considering the Correspondence and other theories of truth, a digression is indicated. Most contemporary Western philosophers have supposed, contrary to the tripartite analysis of truth provided above, that truth has two basic aspects or content, and they have consequently erred. They have supposed that only "meaning and fact" are relevant.<sup>5</sup> This supposition is diametrically antithetical to the analysis I think needs be made if the transcendence of empiricism and pragmatism is to be understood.

When Aristotle said "saying of what is, that it is, is true" and conversely, the implication is that, as Quine and Ullian says,

Truth is a property of sentences; it is the trait shared equally by all that would be rightly affirmed.<sup>6</sup>

But this is only one implication that Aristotle's definition has. It also implies that something *is*, and that which *is*, what makes the proposition (p) or (not-p) affirming or denying that it *is*, to be true or false. Over and above these two components is the value which the affirmation and the facticity of the content (objective) of the proposition has. This is what makes p significant for sentient beings interested in improving their own lives, taming lions, bringing the communist system to an end, defeating the Iraqi army or ensuring the continued dependence and instability of developing countries. Without p (as a sentence) and its content (call it meaning, significance or whatever) having implications for weal or woe for man—both real, potential or imagined—whether p is true will be irrelevant to him. This is why Quine and Ullian and those who follow their line of truth are only partially right. Consider Sybil Wolfgram's procedure, for example:

For purposes of exposition, I shall begin by assuming that the correct subject of the predications 'is true' and 'is false' are type statements, and further that p in 'p' and 'p is true' represents the same type statement.<sup>7</sup>

Even though her concern is with what relationship exists between statements and what makes them true, the scale is unnecessarily loaded in favour of the assertoric function of sentences or statements— and here, she makes a distinction between a statement on the one hand and predicating truth of the statement, which seems rather unnecessary.<sup>8</sup> The only function which such predication performs is emphasis, and discounting this need to distinguish between 'p' and 'p is true' has led toward the formulation of the redundancy theory of truth. For logicians, such emphasis might be important, but they do not, so to say 'truthify', that is, make true.

In this connection, Dummett's discussion of truth, calls for attention. In speaking about the relation of truth to sentences, he glossed some fundamental issues which makes his otherwise illuminating discussion stunted. This happens when he says that there is a similarity between the history teacher's assertion which the school boy follows that "It was neither James I nor Charles I who was beheaded" and "I was either talking to Jean or to Alice but cannot remember which", because he was taken in by the similarity in the structure of the two sentences. It is only this inadvertent confusion that justifies his contention that :

My knowledge that I was talking either to Jean or to Alice derives ultimately from the knowledge that I had at the time that I was talking to (say) Jean; the fact that the incomplete knowledge is all that survives is beside the point. Rather, the difficulty arises because we often make sentences of the form 'p or q' when the ultimate evidence for making them, in the sense indicated, is neither evidence for the truth of p nor evidence for the truth of q.<sup>9</sup>

Dummett seems to ignore the fact the to know that 'p or q' is quasi-meaningless or lacking in content is one thing, to assert a different disjunction when one lacks evidence for either disjunct separately is another, which presents an awkward situation for Dummett's programme, leaving us dismayed.

The reason why pure formalism is of little assistance in determining the issues which truth deals with is clearly shown by Dummett's and Wolfram's oversights. If I had actually talked to either Jean or to Alice (not in a dream, not under hypnotism, drunkenness or seance or under drugs or hallucination or whatever other attenuating circumstances the Cartesian *malin genie* might occasion), then the knowledge I have is definite, in spite of the possibility of forgetting who I actually spoke to. The issue can be settled one way or the other, just like the case of the history teacher and his or her student, by reference to the fact to which the truth appertains. One does not need an arabesque of conceptual detail to see this. On the other hand, going by pure logic, a situation of either/or requires no epistemic locus, because any two statements/sentences can be disjunctively related. This is the warrant the logician has to combine in disjunctive relationships sentences that lack epistemic and ontologic content, such as "either the Devil is upside down or Mathematics is frightened". This is what Dummett captures in saying :

The most striking instance of this is the fact that we are prepared to assert any statement of the form 'p or not p', even though we may have no evidence for the truth of 'p' or for the truth of 'not p'.<sup>10</sup>

even though his initial example concerned 'p or q'. What we find in logic is that we need no knowledge at all to affirm 'p or not p' as such an affirmation is epistemically vacuous. On the other hand, and here lies the catch, we do need some knowledge to know that 'p or q' lacks content, and hence bears no grudge against the redundancy of truth or falsity when



applied to it in some instances while it is quite relevant in others. In actual fact, there can be no such a priori way of grouping or characterizing true sentences of real languages, because what confers truth is not determinable in that way. What the redundancy theory of truth says is not that the phrase "is true" is of no use, but rather, that it neither adds nor detracts from what it qualifies. This is not saying that "is true" performs no epistemic function when added to (some) sentences, and this point is further clarified in our discussion of the coherence theory of truth below.

Ic. (i)

### THE CORRESPONDENCE THEORY OF TRUTH

In considering this account I wish to state that reference to it as a theory might be one of the initial problems that has affected its proper understanding and, perhaps, acceptance. In philosophy we are often compelled to clothe our ideas in grandiose terms and call our views highfalutin names to make them sound impressive and attract attention. Thus, saying that the correspondence account of truth is a theory serves the end of attaining to a class of elaborateness and, by default, pretend to be what it is not. Let us ponder this a bit more.

One intriguing aspect of the philosophical enterprise is the ability of the philosopher to see problems where every other person passes without noticing anything. This ability, however, is both an asset and a liability: It is an asset because it enables man to glimpse vistas that may otherwise have escaped knowledge and a broadening, by a process of critical examination, of our idea of how much and how little we know about ourselves the things about us and the universe at large. However, it is also a liability because it makes us ignore the foundations of theory and encourages flights of critical, speculative and professionalized (technical) fantasy, no matter how patently ridiculous and implausible such endeavours may seem; thus, starting from a vaunted vulnerability of the disclosures of common sense, philosophy outreaches itself by throwing away the baby and the bath water and proclaiming such efforts as being consonant with logic, reason and science.

There can be no doubt that a lot of philosophical water has passed under the bridge of thought since Thales is reputed to have stipulated that everything is made up of water. The desire to look beyond the way things

seem is no doubt useful because it keeps in abeyance many errors, but this has been carried beyond reasonable levels. O'Hear, exemplifying this absurdity, says (and he is not alone in this regard) that

We have no direct access to the world; all our observations of the world and of things in it rests on categorizations and assumptions we impose on what we are observing, on beliefs of ours, in other words... The lack of direct experiential access to the world, combined with growing realization of the way in which our more theoretical beliefs about the world are far from conclusively supported by our observational levels of judgement, has led a number of philosophers to question whether there is any sense in which we are entitled to think that our beliefs about the world are true or justified.<sup>11</sup>

There are two ways of construing what he says here: i) that he is reporting what philosophers have done, which he himself does not necessarily subscribe to. This, however, is ruled out of court because, what he conveys is a categorical affirmation of the inaccessibility of the world to our cognitive equipment. This is what makes the second reading plausible, that, ii) O' Hear thinks that we do not have any way of knowing how things, including ourselves, really are in the world, and, hence, that he is an epistemological sceptic. How he is able to say that Aristotle's definition of truth "is correct" when he has assured us we have no access to the world is very baffling. We can (on O' Hear's understanding) only have indirect access to Aristotle's definition at best, and at that, we cannot know the full implications of what Aristotle meant. This is why O' Hear says that Aristotle's definition should not be seen as referring to anything in the world which "is" as it is described by the "saying", hence

One desirable feature of the Aristotelian definition is that it implies that sayings or statements are what truth and falsity are primarily properties of.<sup>12</sup>

Obviously, O'Hear and those who think along the same lines are fastening on only one aspect of the truth equation. Aristotle clearly had in mind both the "saying" and the "it" which makes the saying true or false. It is this that have led to the explication of the relationship of the "saying" and the "it" in the commonsensical language of "correspondence":

*veritas est adequatio intellectus et rei.*<sup>13</sup>

This can be literally rendered: truth is the adequation of intellect to reality. It is clear here that though this definition aims at saying what commonsense intends, namely, that my assertion that "It is dark outside" is true if and only if it is dark outside at this point in time, it says more, for it is no longer the sentence I use to affirm that can be true or false but my ideas or intellectual state which must correspond to reality. The suspicion that I have here is that the introduction of intellect in the place of language is an unjustifiable fiat which has brought in another issue - that of the cognitive state of the agent. Thus, when philosophers consider the above as the "corresponding" issue, they are easily led astray; complications that could have been avoided are sneaked in. But, even then, not realizing that truth is not a fit between reality and intellect as such, the additional problem of how to understand "correspondence" has been thought injurious to the definition provided by Aristotle. If one could get over the scholastic hangover of speaking prematurely of what impact truth/falsity formulating propositions have on our intellect and attend to the definition of truth about factual, experienceable reality, we would be compelled to see that the most accurate account of truth is the one in terms of "correspondence".

Now, it may be asked what is meant by "correspondence"? I can only say that it is the relationship of fit between the "saying" -the statement- and the "it" - or state of affairs, event, idea, etc. which it is about. "It is dark outside" is true if and only if "it is dark"; my saying, writing, recording on tape, etc. would only be means of conveying it to others or tethering that fact; the reaction you have to it if you were with me when I said it or if you were the one at the other end of the phone, proposing to visit me, or if you read it in my memoir or essay and realize why I did not go out that moment, etc. would serve to convey the truth of what I said.

Correspondence is not such a mysterious thing that cannot be serviceable because it originated from our commonsense idea of truth. We do not have to be pretentiously profound by consigning everything ordinary to trash-basket. The word 'correspondence' is only a tool or relational term aimed at capturing a feature of reality and its linguistic (in the widest possible sense) representation. In this regard, William James seems to be clear on what truth is. He says,

Truth emerges from facts: but they dip forward into facts again and add to them, which facts again create or reveal new truth... and so on indefinitely. The 'facts' themselves meanwhile are not *true*. They simply *are*. Truth is the function of the beliefs (the statements) that start and terminate among them:<sup>14</sup>

and, in another place, he says

The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made true by events. Its verity is in fact an event, a process: the process, namely of its verifying itself, its verification. Its validity is the process of its validation.<sup>15</sup>

One may balk at some of the metaphysical implications of the words that we use in conceptualizing our ideas, but this in no way indicates that the validity of our ideas (that is, our having them) cannot be separated from the unintended masks that language robes them in. This is equally separable from instances when unacceptable positions issue from transcendentalism and idealism, in the supposition that truth is eternal and otherworldly, to be attained only in a totally different realm. Perhaps, one should separate further the need to speak of a transcendental realm in an ordinary language from the need to put ordinary things in transcendental realm.

Lonergan's very illuminating exposition of truth is marred by the metaphysics of idealism that surrounds his project. Hence, his problem falls within the last category mentioned above. Speaking on "The Notion of Truth" he distinguished six aspects:

- (i) the criterion of truth
- (ii) the definition of truth
- (iii) the ontology of truth
- (iv) truth in expression
- (v) The appropriation of truth
- (vi) the truth of interpretation.<sup>16</sup>

What is of particular interest for the correspondence theory of truth is what he has to say under the definition of truth. There can be no doubt that his distinctions are of interest and should be patiently studied. In fact, it seems clear to me that a careful attention to the distinctions will

go a long way in dispelling the usual offhand dismissal of the correspondence theory of truth—particularly in the relationship between being, knowing, affirmation, verification and endorsement.

For being was identified with what is to be known through intelligent grasp and reasonable affirmation: but the only reasonable affirmation is the true affirmation, and so, being is what is known truly. Inversely, then, knowing is true by its relation to being, and truth is a relation of knowing to being... truth consists in the absence of any difference between the knowing and the known being.<sup>17</sup>

Represented thus, truth cannot be separated from what makes it true even if, in the end, truths are represented in language (as they usually are). The apparent phenomenological diction found in Lonergan only reinforces the necessity to always ground truth in reality. This is what makes William James' words to ring clearly true, in spite of the simplicity of the way it is presented. He says,

Truth for us is simply a collective name for verification-process... Truth is made... in the course of experience.<sup>18</sup>

#### Ic.(ii).

The vicissitudes that the correspondence account of truth has faced have been a result of many factors. As an account that aims to capture our every day attitude and demarcation of truth from falsehood, it lacks the elegance that other 'theories', deliberately formulated (coined) have. It is a realist account. It is the empiricist account to which we often subscribe in our dealings with each other and with nature. It is no wonder that in spite of attempts to coerce us into submission by various forces, we still remain empiricists: even when we are philosophers in one breath, we are still empirical realists the greater part of our lives.

However, as philosophes, we can not be complacent. There are so many compelling reasons that signal suspicion and, even, distrust of what we would ordinarily have taken for granted. These reasons have been celebrated from the period of the earliest sceptics. They compelled Plato to place Truth, with capital T, and Knowledge, with capital K, outside the reach of man. They have also compelled the neo-platonists and schoolmen to look beyond the realm of the mundane to search for enduring knowledge.

Now, if one says one knows, one expects, often without meaning to, that what one knows is true. That it is true is not just enough, its truth must be such that time and space would not be able to affect the item so known. Or, what else do philosophers mean when they rhetorically contend that knowledge does not admit of error-how can you say that you know and may be wrong or that the item of your knowledge may turn out other than you claim it to be-false? What, Plato would ask, would the sense be in identifying the fallible with the infallible? Can we be comfortable with a truth that is true today but false tomorrow? These are very grave considerations: the notion of correspondence itself is so indeterminate that we are left wondering. So, where do we go for comfort and assurance-at least, even if we go on behaving normally and engaging in meaningful discourse with others by using correspondence, the ultimate goal would still be to obtain something that would not be subject to infelicitous mutations to which we and our items of cognition are so vulnerable. There is no way we are going to get outside our experiential milieu but we surely must be able to ground the disclosures of experience in some more valuable and long lasting nature that gives enduring satisfaction. This is exactly the point at which the empiricist-whether one who claims that the only way of knowing is through experience or that the only mode of being that is there to be known is ultimately material, experientiable matter-and scientists, together with the positivists, stop their ship or ground their ship. While obtaining some measure of valid knowledge for us, they have left many others unaccounted for, and also left the issue of value undiscussed. In fact the empiricist and positivist, also probably, analytic treatment of the issue of value is as a non-issue. Values are not things with tangible nature out-there and cannot be grasped in the same way. Consequently, they cannot be adequately confronted and treated.

Id.

#### THE COHERENCE THEORY OF TRUTH

As it is not just issues of value that the empiricist has left unaccounted for, other issues are begging to be dealt with. One of these issues is the nature of truths which do not just consist of facts out-there. They are not things that can be verified by reference to external objects. But they are still there: relations between propositions, logical truths, mathematical certainties, intuitive discoveries, etc. Thus, while one may not obviously disregard the correspondence account of truth, other

accounts call for attention.

Before the logicians and formalists systematized the coherence account of truth, the grains of the theory had surfaced in the works of ancient and modern philosophers-especially notable are Plato and Descartes. Thus,

cognitio fit per assimilationem cogniti et cognoscentis.<sup>19</sup>

meaning that propositions are to be held true if and only if they copy the eternal thought that considers them. The world of ideas and cogito are such thoughts that make our propositions true. The possibility of eternally participating in such a realm of truth has remained very alluring and rationalism has developed on such lines. And there are numerous advantages that such truth, if gained, would have for man: it would be self-insuring for one, and for another, one would be able to dispense with scepticism or ultra-scepticism which considers that we never have knowledge.

However, questions were very quickly formulated, both against the system of Plato and the cogito of Descartes. No less vulnerable has been the pre-established harmony of Leibnitz. Thus, Kant was compelled to seek a third category of truth-synthetic a priori truths; a realm which, recognizing the validity of the use of Hume's Fork seeks to create a third category between that forked prongs. The most useful service that rationalism has performed is to advert our attention to the possibility of using unaided reason to devise elaborate systems, which internally coherent, can approximate particular logical and formal truths that proofs can capture. But many people have hoped for greater and better service.

Before dismissing the coherence account of truth, many empiricists are compelled to consider what the coherentist has to offer. In a way, the truth which the coherence account proffers cannot be discounted, unless at a loss, because it is obvious that there is a class of things which we do know and which we use language-sentences, propositions, statements, affirmations, etc-to convey or record which the rationalist attempts to express. As Armour has simply formulated it, one can say that

the contention which forms the core of coherence theory of truth is that truth is a certain relation which holds amongst judgements.<sup>20</sup>

Though the coherence theory is more elaborate, it seems to often tend toward a formalist interpretation. In fact, the word coherence itself is capable of varied interpretation. This tendency is understandable, given the fact that it arose from desire to account for a peculiar fact which the correspondence account fails to consider. But this has been the weakness of the theory.

The theory seeks to consider formal truths and the way we come to know them, which seem not to carry any empirical reference. In so doing, it neglects the possibility of discrepant, but internally coherent, systems. And when systems that exhibit these discrepancies were formulated, the coherence theory collapses. Thus, it led to suggestions that both correspondence and coherence accounts of truth are criteria of truth not actually theories. While this suggestion is admissible, the fact however remains that both theories have satisfied a yearning and failed to provide an ultimate account of truth which it initially set out to do.

Empiricists are often disdainful of rationalist attempts to build grandiose systems. While empiricists attempt to lay claim to being scientific, the rationalists can lay equal claim to being scientific, because the theoretical component of science which empiricists cares so much about is as important as the practical. Obviously if man has remained only a thoughtless practical being, there would have been limited advancement of science and technology. The internal coherence of the numerous systems have made it possible to choose between alternative systems and also made such choice rational-justifiable.

It might be objected at this point that I have neither presented a detailed account of both the correspondence and coherence theories of truth nor the various objections that have highlighted their inadequacies. It should be stated that under different circumstances, such an objection might be relevant, but what I intend to get at in this discussion is the nature of the transposition from the search for truth by philosophy to the search for the useful. This search for the valuable marks, as I conceive it, a transcendence of empiricism and rationalism on the one hand, and a sidetracking of the ultimate issues that science and technology would have to confront on the other hand. Thus, those who wish for a detailed treatment of the various theories of truth can easily consult such books listed in the notes and references, and of course, other valuable materials in their originals. But, it still bears restatement that the starting point of



theories of truth is to enable us to discriminate between truth and falsehood, this is what can be regarded as the goal of cognition.<sup>21</sup> This is the only way in which attention would not be diverted from the critical issues that have led to them.

One cannot but disagree with Bertrand Russell who is reputed to have once observed that in spite of the fact that every philosopher claims to pursue truth they seldom attain it because they do not desire to reach it.<sup>22</sup> Clearly this reverses the reason why philosophers often seem to fly in the face of reason, and an 'ad hominem' is not out of place here, because Russell's philosophies exhibit such a desire that was not ultimately realized, not because of an absence of a desire or lack of will to reach truth but because there is no such ultimate "truth" disembodied, transcendent, there, to be reached, and also, because philosophers often have to pursue strands of argument wherever they lead—even to absurd conclusions. In the end, each philosopher, standing in his/her corner, have supposed they are holding the truth—all truths. The correspondence theory seeks to corner empirical facts, while the coherence theory seeks to corner axiomatic facts and should be regarded as complementary. But the coherence theory, though concerned with language, does not seem to cover all linguistic demands. Hence, the semantic theory of truth was formulated, and it is to this we now turn. But, it should be remarked that the semantic theory has limited bearing (at least as far as this writer can immediately see) on our concern, hence it will attract the most cursory treatment.

Ic.

### THE SEMANTIC THEORY OF TRUTH

The impetus for the formation of the semantic 'theory' of truth arose from a direction not altogether connected with the useful contribution that the account has provided. Positivism at its height attempted to jettison from the parlance of serious discourse concepts that has no factual, empirical content and in their zeal, truth fell under the hatchet, because it does not add or remove from any proposition when added as suffix or withheld. In his earliest work Ayer says

Reverting to the analysis of truth, we find that in all sentences of the form 'p is true', the phrase 'is true' is logically superfluous. When, for example, one says that the proposition 'Queen Anne is dead' is true, all

that one is saying is that Queen Anne is dead. And similarly, when one says that the proposition 'Oxford is the capital of England' is false, all that one is saying is that Oxford is not the capital of England.<sup>23</sup>

This suggests that thinking that instead of saying 'p', saying 'p is true' performs any purpose is a product of some mix-up in language, and as Ockham's Razor is a handy tool, such superfluity should be dispensed with. Thus, such predication of truth and falsity of propositions are linguistically redundant, just like saying that "God exist" is, according to this line of thought, a misnomer.<sup>24</sup> According to Sybil Wolfram, the redundancy theory consists of three theses :

1. that 'p' and 'p is true' are equivalent
2. that asserting that 'p is true' could always be replaced by asserting 'p', and
3. that to say of p that it is true adds nothing to/says nothing about p,<sup>25</sup>

all of which attempt to capture an important aspect of our linguistic practice in some situations. That this does not however follow is evident in many cases in which it is necessary to insist that 'p is true' says something over and above merely 'p'. In such situations, it is obvious that 'true' and 'false' are not redundant.

Deriving from this tradition, however, is the formalist or logicist theory formulated by Alfred Tarski that has been called the semantic theory of truth and is concerned with how the meaning of sentences can be explained by "trying to relate sentences in particular (technical) languages with their truth conditions".<sup>26</sup> There are two things to note about Tarski's account of truth. In the first place, it takes seriously the supposition by many western scholars that truth is a linguistic property: they suggest that only sentences (propositions, assertions, statements, etc. which follow from them) can be properly said to carry the predicate truths. However, when this is formulated in the redundancy theory, it was discovered unacceptable, hence Tarski had to provide a technical definition for a technical language-in which "p" and "p is true" are really equivalent because there is no room for an additional "is true" in formal/symbolic calculations, even though, contrariwise (and this is the Achilles's heel of the theory), there is room for "is false" which the symbol "not" (written as  $\wedge$  or  $\sim$ ) stands for. The second thing is that the

account should be regarded as more appropriate to meaning, because it speaks to what a proposition means rather than to truth; though truth cannot be totally discounted.

Thus, the words of Dummett remain opposite here, he says

Baffled by the attempt to describe in general the relation between language and reality, we have nowadays abandoned the correspondence theory of truth, and justify our doing so on the score that it was an attempt to state a criterion of truth in the sense in which this cannot be done. Nevertheless, the correspondence theory expresses an important feature of the concept of truth which is not expressed by the law 'it is true that p if and only if p' and which we have so far left quite out of account: that a statement is true (if and) only if there is something in the world in virtue of which it is true. Although we no longer accept the correspondence theory we remain realists *au fond*; we retain in our thinking a fundamentally realist conception of truth.<sup>27</sup>

Obviously the correspondence theory has undergone many difficulties and only indirectly do many philosophers-even realists-defend it, one would be pressed to ask why Dummett can say we still remain realists in spite of non-acceptance of correspondence account. It seems to me that only a desire for abstract profundity can originate such ambivalence. For if the correspondence theory of truth is true, why should we not embrace it. The important issue is to understand exactly what it claims and where that claim terminates. That it terminates somewhere and needs the services of other accounts is what other theories have surfaced to fulfil. The various accounts have addressed different aspects of the same reality: a reality that consists of humans in a universe populated by and with diverse objects-concrete and abstract-and which humans must relate to cognitively, which cognitive relationship must be expressed by the tool of coordination, codification, conceptualization, communication and interpretation available, viz, Language; which tool and its disclosures must equally be judged for performance and correctness (non-performance and wrongness), hence truth and falsity. But, then, truth and falsity cannot stand isolated from the reasons of their origination; they are useful items needed for the measurement of our performance in relation to the universe and for the prediction of future performance. Ignoring this last aspect has created a gulf which the Pragmatic Theory of truth has attempted to bridge, and it is to this we now turn.

II.

## THE PRAGMATIC THEORY OF TRUTH

At the very heart of pragmatism is its account of truth. It is the blood that flows from it into every artery, vein, sinew and cranny—it is essential to any pragmatic theory to understand what it says on truth. However, pragmatism itself is bred out of impatience with system-building and logic-chopping of its predecessors and contemporaries. Founded within an atmosphere of freedom and secularism, a secularism that distances or pretends to distance religion from the market place and political landscape while proclaiming its religiosity and humaneness, pragmatism is enamoured in a spirit of individualism that sees self-interest as the primeval goal of intellectual and practical endeavours and seeks to align this with our rational and emotional inclinations. Pragmatism marks a return to an aspect of judgement which the other theories have relegated to the background; but only to an aspect that suits the spirit of the new-found liberty. For it could have treated all aspects of the nature of truth and other issues but it could not because it lacks both the patience and the will to do so. But this lack itself is a human lack because no theory is all-embracing as to capture all aspects at the same time. Unfortunately the liberty and pursuit of freedom that bred freedom farflung into all areas has almost become a cumbersome milestone dragging back further advances toward further freedom and liberalism. And this phenomenon is evident already in the Jamesian demarcation of pragmatism from humanism. According to James, pragmatism is narrower than humanism because while humanism requests that

the truth of any statement consists in the consequences, and particularly in their being good consequences.<sup>8</sup>

pragmatism makes no such request. All it demands is that truth make a difference, whether the difference then be good consequences or bad consequences is not its concern. While we will presently elaborate the pragmatic theory of truth, it should be said that the consequences of this lack of concern for what results from the disregard of consequences of truth and falsehood has been monumental for mankind. These consequences will be elaborated later, but it should be recalled that pragmatism is against transcendental idealism and rationalism which creates a realm of truth accessible only to an ideal observer who is all-seeing. In fact,

nothing is more loathsome to the pragmatist than what John Dewey calls the spectator theory of knowledge, a form of foundationalism common to phenomenalist empiricism and Cartesian rationalism. Valid as this disapproval however is, the pragmatist goes to the other extreme in supposing that the human concern with and for truth is to use truth for goals for which she cares not whether goods or bad-an a-normative truth. Consequently, as hinted under section Id, capturing the criteria of truth under the factual content-correspondence, the systemic content-coherence, semantic content-linguistic, would not be enough; the valuational nature of human concern to attain truth and avoid error and falsehood demands attention. This is what humanism, bred in a genteel culture sought to capture, but which the brash pragmatic conquest of nature and science seeks to jettison.

It is true that the main pragmatists, Peirce, James and Dewey, have differences of refinement among them, but essentially they agree on what constitutes pragmatism and what constitutes a theory of truth. When one considers propositions as true or false, for the pragmatist, the method of resolving the dispute is quite simple. According to James

The pragmatic method in such cases is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences. What difference would it practically make to anyone if this notion rather than that notion were true? If no practical difference whatever can be traced, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing, and all dispute is idle. Whenever a dispute is serious, we ought to be able to show some practical difference that follow from one side or the other's being right.<sup>28</sup>

Similarly Peirce, after pointing out that our beliefs are really rules for action said, that,

to develop a thought's meaning we need only determine what conduct it is fitter to produce: that conduct is for us its sole significance... To attain perfect clearness in our thoughts of an object, then, we need only consider what conceivable effects of a practical kind the object may involve-what sensations are we to expect from it, and what reactions must we prepare. Our conception of these effects, whether immediate or remote, is then for us the whole of our conception of the object, so far as that conception has positive significance at all.<sup>30</sup>

Thus when we consider the notion of truth and falsity we find that it is the difference which true statements make that interests the pragmatist. We are more comfortable with truths because they ensure continued success, and expectations of success. On the moral side when one speaks the truth and is noted for so doing the breeds on a credit system.<sup>51</sup> In this regard

True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate, verify. False ideas are those we cannot.<sup>52</sup>

Taken literally this has a tendency to mislead, but what James means here is the fact that false ideas are those that fail to turn out as expected. The use of validation, corroboration, verification might mislead, because to know that a proposition is false all one has to know on this count is that it is not the case, by arriving at a negation of its claim. But what James and others have in mind is elaborated when he says of truth that

‘it is useful because it is true’ or ‘it is true because it is useful’. Both these phrases mean exactly the same thing, namely that there is an idea that gets fulfilled and can be verified. True is the name of whatever idea starts the verification-process, useful is the name for its completed function in experience.<sup>53</sup>

Though this formulation seems to be empiricist, it goes beyond empiricist account of truth, because, ultimately the credit system on which truth lives is the usefulness which it serves. This usefulness however is multiple in nature and enhances our scientific practice-satisfying our needs by leading to no frustrations or contradictions.<sup>54</sup> Empiricists consider verification and correspondence, and this covers correspondence in principle also. While the empiricist however fails to separate those that are valuable from those that are not, the pragmatist takes the bold step of disregarding the innumerable truths which have never entered into our consideration on a cognitive level simply because they do not make a difference or affect our lives one way or the other. For what would it mean to say that a sentence is true when it has no relevance to any thing? While the empiricist might consider it valuable to know it for itself, that is, as a truth which experience might confirm, but if for the pragmatist there is nothing to be gained from it, then it does not count, because

...possession of true thoughts means everywhere the possession of invaluable instruments of action...<sup>35</sup> From this simple cue pragmatism gets her general notion of truth as something essentially bound up with the way in which one movement in our experience may lead us toward other moments which it will be worthwhile to have been led to.<sup>36</sup>

Even in the domain of purely mental relations, truth is regarded in terms of utility—that is what consequences follow from their truth. Without such consequences, they may as well not exist at all. The ‘eternity’ of truths in the realm of ideas must be cashed out in the sense of what good they yield if they are put to some use. For

In this realm of mental relations, truth again is an affair of leading. We relate one abstract idea with another. Framing in the end the great systems of logical and mathematical truths, under the respective terms of which the sensible fact of experience eventually arrange themselves, so that our eternal truths hold good of realities also. This marriage of fact and theory is endlessly fertile.<sup>37</sup>

One issue which the pragmatist account fails to deal squarely with, apart from its account of religious moral and mathematical truths which are said by Russell to have been glossed over, is that it is selective in determining what constitutes truth and how truth shall be interpreted at all. The fact alluded to here will be illustrated when consequences of pragmatism outside the purely philosophical domain—in the work-a-day process of economics, government, science and technology, etc. are considered. For now we turn to a brief consideration of rationalism and empiricism on truth and how the cleavage generated there-in has engineered a shift away from the search for truth toward the search for usefulness.

## II.

### RATIONALISMANDEMPIRICISMONTRUTH: THEINEXHAUSTIVE OPTIONS

William James perceives a need to contrast rationalism—which he often equates with transcendentalism and idealism—with empiricism with which he associates pragmatism, though careful enough to always indicate the point at which the last two part ways. It is instructive to understand how the pragmatist sees the rationalist and empiricist

conception of reality, knowledge of reality and truth in order to understand the inexhaustiveness of both and the necessity for pragmatic philosophy. In doing this, we should remind ourselves that the ultimate goal of philosophy and the philosopher is the attainment of wisdom. When wisdom is attained, then the wise man discerns the nature of reality and she also has access to truth. For procedural ease, let us consider first the features of rationalism-according to James.

For the pragmatist, rationalism means going by reason and principles. Rationalism is intellectualistic, idealistic, optimistic, religious, monistic, dogmatical and believes in freedom of the will.<sup>38</sup> These are definitely large claims, but they can be conceded for the sake of progress in discussion. At least those who consider these claims tenuous can hold their peace and see what obtains on the other, empiricist, end of the curtain. In fact, it would be seen that James' claims are not without foundation. He refers to the various issues which rationalists consider and the conclusions they reach. Let us consider some of these

In the first place when rationalists consider what there is-that is, the ontological and metaphysical issue of being-they end up by denigrating the world of experience and matter. Plato's real world is not here in the physical realm and Descartes' criteria of knowing and what can be known is clearness and distinctness obtained in moments of intellectual intuition-what may be called intellection. Only purely rational ideas can be known with certainty and constitute the ideal of episteme for Plato. The world that is available for sense knowledge is uncertain, fluctuating and unreal. Reason enables man to discover that the same surface cannot be both black and white all over at once, that twice two equals four, that if A is an animal and all animals are long-fangled, then A is long-fangled. Reason enables man to coordinate his/her ideas. Thus, according to rationalists, reason neither needs nor requires/depend on experience to start and/or thrive; what it thrives on are ideas which are either recollected, innate, intuitive or inborn.<sup>39</sup> Inattention and, possibly, laziness renders the reasoning capacity inadequate while pure contemplation and development of reason shows that nothing is too esoteric or abstract for reason to explore.<sup>40</sup> The whole point of Platonic theory of Forms is to dichotomize between perceptual knowledge and rational knowledge. It was an urgent need that arose from the divergent and discrepant conclusions to which empirical, perceptual disclosures led pre-socratics and contemporaries of Plato and the discovery that there



exists an area that avails sure, infallible knowledge, namely, logic and mathematics. Thus Plato progressively transcended the vagaries of perception in a dialectical way until some firm, sure type of certainty was attained in the realm of the purely intelligible.<sup>11</sup>

For the rationalist there does not "exist" any certainty to be known or truth to be discovered with the senses. A number of ideas were developed which have continued to influence philosophical thinking since. Some of them are that empirical knowledge can only give rise to opinions, that such opinions, though better than ignorance, are never certain, that the uncertainty of such opinions and beliefs is derived from the fallible, changing nature of both the senses and the objects of sensation, that because sensory knowledge is fallible it is inferior and cannot constitute knowledge in the proper and desirable sense, that as perception often leads to mutually discrepant theses, the contradictions it generates rules it out of knowledge court, that reason or intellect is capable of grasping infallible, certain knowledge of a higher, greater realm than the senses, that the *a priori* knowledge so derived is superior to a *posteriori* knowledge and that the areas of logic and mathematics provide examples of rational, incorrigible truths and are to be relied upon, for they are more valuable.

The pragmatist is decidedly against intellectualism or rationalism or transcendentalism. James rallied against those who would ignore the things they stumble over and fall, only to peruse those in the starry heavens. Though such a realm holds a fascination and allure and may have emotional and psychological fulfilment to those who cogitate them, they could not and must not be substituted for action. The rationalist is not just claiming a realm of reality expressible in logical and mathematical equations, he holds that there are transcendental entities, that these entities are more real and that the truths they present are eternal and immutable. It is here that the empiricist picks up the gauntlet and counters by saying that a truth that has no factual effect on matters is of no consequence and can be ignored. Logical and mathematical truths are understandable in that they systematize and relate our daily life experiences to a logical and formal system. Even these would be trivially harmless unless the truths they speak to make presentations of empirical consequences.

The desire to emphasize the reality of knowable matter, that can be comprehended and represented in empirical language, whose truth can

be determined by reference to experience, and which is a natural point of view, is what empiricism stands for. James identified some banal features of empiricism as follows: the empiricist goes by the facts, or by experience or disclosures of the senses, in other words she is sensation-alistic (not as applied currently in journalistic media parlance), materialistic, pessimistic, irreligious, fatalistic, pluralistic, sceptical and relativistic. These cluster of ideas, though not always totally congruent, represent the empiricist bias. That there are degrees of empiricism and room for individual idiosyncracies and/or eccentricities is granted, as, for example, in logical atomism, logical positivism, linguistic analysis, etc. But for James:

Never were as many men of a decidedly empiricist proclivity in existence as there are at the present day. Our children, one may say, are almost born scientific.<sup>42</sup>

The pragmatists' dissatisfaction with empiricism- whether phenomenalist foundationalist, or simply, realist materialist type- stems from the latter's disregard of why we seek to know and what difference that knowing can make for sentient beings, constituted the way we are, with the types of lives we lead and the goals we set for ourselves. A return to this indicates that we should sidestep the bifurcation of reality and truth and not just go on speaking as if the purpose of knowledge is not to aid action. Thus by contrast to empiricism and rationalism, the pragmatist asks an unusual question:

Grant an idea or belief to be true, what concrete difference will its being true make in any one's actual life? How will the truth be realized? What experiences will be different from those which would obtain if the belief were false? What, in short, is the truth's cash-value in experiential terms?<sup>43</sup>

In doing this the pragmatist is not disagreeing with either the rationalist and the empiricist fundamentally. All it requests for is that the purpose of science (science conceived very broadly) should not be forgotten. We must remember that we live in an inclement universe, hence, we need to ensure that our energy is not wasted and our direction is not lost in the maze of investigations. While one could go ahead and search, one should not become extravagant enough as to be purposeless: whatever truth is located must be harnessed to some goal.

In fact, the pragmatist does not directly engage the weakness of the dualism that led to the hybrid position canvassed by Kant or the relativism that Einstein has made to become the hub of contemporary science. Outside "science" this weakness is increasingly becoming too obtrusive to be ignored and researches are being more vigorously pursued into areas that used to be considered as voodoo and unintelligible. The continued existence of religion, the failure of logical positivism in eliminating morality as an objective realm of philosophical discourse, metaphysics as a serious discipline, the success that have attended traditional medical practices, the contributions of intuition, imagination, etc. in the divising and creation of scientific and technological breakthroughs, all suggest that uncritical, contemptuous excision of any source of knowledge and truth from science is unscientific. And, all this would be quite acceptable (or should be anyway) to the pragmatist, provided it yields truths that do make some practical difference. Let us briefly consider how the relativism resulting from the demise of rationalist and empiricist conceptions of knowledge and truth has led to pragmatism: a spirit that encourages inquiry in all its multitudinous aspects but which cautions that at the end of the day only those results and claims that bear fruit by having consequences shall be considered serious.

### III.

#### RELATIVISM IN PHILOSOPHY AND SCIENCE

We live in a relativistic universe. The Newtonian universe which existed till the beginning of the twentieth century was one in which conventional physics adequately described matter-in-motion. But relativistic universe is one in which matter is in motion at very great speeds. When velocities are sharply increased some strange things begin to happen. Such high velocities, we now know, are the general rule at both the microscopic and cosmological scales of physical reality. It is only at the macroscopic level of experience that Newtonian theories still operate.

Since Albert Einstein published his paper on special relativity in 1905, our understanding of our universe and our place in it has undergone continued revision. It may not seem at first glance that relativistic notions affect our routine behaviour, but the fact is that we are immersed in relativistic events. For instance, light photons striking our retinas can be described only in relativistic terms, and the very atoms that compose our bodies are themselves in motion at these high velocities.

Beyond all this, the significant fact is that a new worldview was born with special relativity. It has gradually become part of our consciousness.<sup>44</sup>

I have quoted Christian at length here to drive home the significant way in which developments in scientific understanding of the nature of the universe have, in the contemporary period, altered man's perception, comprehension, codification, interpretation and doxastic attitude towards the nature of things-herself inclusive. But, strictly speaking, one can hardly say that Einstein created philosophical relativity though his contribution, by way of articulation of a scientific theory, has enabled philosophy to abandon an enfeebling timidity that have generated foundationalism of both the right and left: on the right rationalist foundationalism, epitomized in Cartesian egocentrism encapsulated in the cogito, and on the left, the phenomenalist, positivist search for the given, qualia, *sensa* or data, the rock-bottom on which to found belief in experience and its disclosures. In philosophy, because no records of prior formulations are considered or available, the search for wisdom is credited to have begun with Thales. Apparently those before him never thought about fundamental, ultimate issues that form philosophy or so we are expected to believe; and, if they did, they never came up with answers similar to those he fathered. Be that as it is, relativism has been an old phenomenon in philosophy, in spite of our human desire for unity and order, a holism that craves for systematizing and hierarchy in all things. Because, as it were, when Heraclitus contended that one never steps into the same river twice and Protagoras that man is the measure, they were both formulating theories with philosophically sound foundations steeped in relativism.

Considered as metaphysical or ontological theories, they imply a multiplicity of nature and change, a perpetual flux perpetually presenting varied and various angles to one and many percipient and cognizing agents at one and different periods. In other words, the word reality, or what there is, continually change: this same world was first considered as flat, then circular, as the centre of the universe, then that the sun is the centre. In fact these views are themselves being continually revised or refined because we are approaching a situation of probable nilcentrism and multiverse instead of heliocentrism and universe. At least, science has authoritatively suggested many universes and many galaxies and there is no ruling out the possibility of life on a yet undiscovered universe!

In other words, what there is or what constitute reality has to depend on 'who' is involved and what perspective he occupies. When we consider other areas such as morality, religion, politics, culture, etc. one-finds this flux bewildering. The dematerialization of matter and the cognate dematerialization of mind shows that,

man is not a passive perceiver of stimuli coming from an external world, but in a very concrete sense *creates* his universe... The world as we experience it is the product of perception not the cause of it.<sup>45</sup>

This is contrary to either rationalism or empiricism, but because it takes such a long time to shun accustomed ways of reasoning, man has continued to hold on to hackneyed views about the universe. Physics has found it not only expedient but necessary to obey the demands of scientific discoveries, it

has given up the hope of finding a thing in itself such as the atom of the mechanistic universe as an ultimate reality; in quantum Physics the object of research is not nature itself anymore, but man's investigation of nature...<sup>46</sup>

All these have implications for philosophy of empirical and rational knowledge. Other areas are not less affronted. The area of metaphysics has unsettled virtually all domains of research and thrown everything into a flux. Contending cultures, moralities, religions, and so called nationalistic aristocratism, egocentrism, empowerment, etc are masquerades launched, like space-crafts, by the dissolution of unity of knowledge. The flux has dire consequences for mankind because knowledge, in its continual advancement, has only continued to disclose new frontiers and vistas as yet unexplored. Epistemological relativism seems the only natural view justifiable. But mankind seems not to be ready for it: proclamations of democracy and liberalism are only servants for specific goals and designed ultimate ends.

All areas of scholarship has benefitted from Einsteinian reactivation of philosophical relativism. He could only have advanced this however, indirectly, because it is only science that accepts the limitations of truths thus far discovered, and it is only science alone that openly accepts that those truths are themselves of transient historical life span. Maybe because science could do nothing about this. Maybe!

Relativistic phenomena astound the layman, excite the physicist, and boggle the mind of the philosopher. In fact, the physicists don't even pretend to understand much of what they describe: they go their way developing pragmatic equations without worrying very much whether their formulas describe realities presently accessible to experience.<sup>47</sup>

In a situation like this, eternal truth is lost, and ideal of verification is hacked in the middle. Reason can disclose only limited truth and experience is incapacitated on many fronts by limitations with which it has to cohabit. While attempts have to be made to attain better understanding of ourselves and our universe, and, of course, other universes, these would have to be done with all modesty and responsibility. We may go ahead and postulate grandiose and highfalutin theories and stand back to admire the fruits of our labours like batik arts or oil paintings produced in moments of scarce ingenuity, we may fashion all novel instruments and contraptions, our helplessness must continue to dawn on us and compel us to tarry, otherwise we may set in motion forces greater than our computations have projected. This is relativism everywhere. And pragmatism is an attempt to grapple with relativism through an evasion of either or the horns of the dilemma of rationalism and empiricism. The latter two have a concern to ask for reality and truth, but the pragmatist sidesteps this issue and proceeds to action-actions that are required to be of consequence, not necessarily good ones though. Perhaps this is not a straightforwardly fair assessment of the position of the pragmatist. Surely, many people may be smarting to react, for they know the truth and would want that truth to make the difference. I believe that the point being advanced here is worthy of arguing for, even if it does not constitute the truth. It should be good if it compels us to pause to ponder.

#### IV.

#### THE PRAGMATIC 'POINT DE DEPART'

The validity of the anonymous deputation cited by Christian is indisputable; there is no doubt that new and robust energies and ideas bustled in the new world, that is, in United States of America. The irrepressible panache issued forth in all manner of ways, and as the country settled down to the business of harnessing resources for development and growth, it was a time to look for guiding principle or doctrine by which the new spirit shall be analysed *ex post facto* and guided in future. Christian says

It has often been noted that pragmatism could only have been born on American soil, since it reflects the spirit of the nineteenth century, the frontier spirit of individualism, self-reliance and practicality.<sup>48</sup>

This contrasts deeply with the subtlety of the British Analytic tradition or the system-building pursuits of the German idealism. There is a lot of impatience in pragmatism, an impatience bordering on iconoclasm. This was the spirit of the age that bred pragmatism. The contemporaneous lamentations of Richard Rorty, Putnam, Davidson and Hacking are beacons to return to pragmatism; and ultimately John Rawls' theory of justice reflects a pragmatic attempt to make the best of the given situation.<sup>49</sup> Pragmatism started off not directly as a theory of truth, but as a theory of meaning paralleled to the positivism that developed about the same time in Vienna Circle. Only the working out of the greater ramifications it portends for epistemology and science led it into methodological pragmatism and theory of truth. And, in fact, its proponents are often weary of being seen to be presenting an elaborate theory when all they wanted is a guide for action. Meanwhile, let us understand Peirce's attempt to provide a theory of meaning.

In Peirce's view, if one is asked what makes any idea meaningful, the only justifiable answer would consist of whether the idea made any difference in our experience. As such the meaning of any idea is no more than this because our idea of anything is our idea of its sensible effects. To say that "it is raining outside" would, on this score, lack any meaning for anybody unless one would go outside and get wet unless one wears a raincoat or uses an umbrella. It is only by reference to such consequences that such an idea or sentences could make any sense to us.

Now, Christian thought that this account of meaning, following on the heels of positivism is a "wholly subjective" one. I can not agree with this. He even cites the examples of ice and match flame to show how ideas are converted in meaning to the consequences they have, but these examples only show the objectivity of the criterion proposed by the pragmatist.<sup>50</sup> The consequences alluded to are capable of intersubjective verification, as they neither depend on the idiosyncratic intuitions of a Cartesian ego or on the personal subjective content of an experiencing empiricist seeking a foundation as such. Empiricism could even proclaim an objectivist epistemology if it grants the existence of material objects

as real, not either as visuo-tactual continuants, permanent possibilities of sensation or as logical constructions. In this regard, there would be a coalescence of opinion regarding objects, even though only propositions that are verifiable are meaningful to the empiricist, while, contrariwise, only those that make some difference in experience would have meaning to the pragmatist. While the rationalist would dispute the meaningfulness of empirical statement because of the numerous problems highlighted by Descartes in his methodic doubt, Peter Unger in his super neurosurgeon sceptical defence of ignorance and the empiricist rejection of metaphysical propositions, ethical statements from the realm of meaning along with positivism and, while granting the meaningfulness of logical and mathematical statements, still go ahead to charge them of being irrelevant to actual things, the pragmatist is able to have it both ways; all statements make meaning so long they have consequences in experience of sentient agents.

However, this contribution is not the one by which pragmatism is most widely known. It is what is called the pragmatic theory of truth that has made pragmatism most famous. I do believe that pragmatists actually do not have a theory of truth; rather what pragmatism proffers is a standard by which truth and falsity can be demarcated. They would not ask "what is truth?" since the search for that is, as such, not the goal of inquiry. As James puts it, the questions that arise are :

Grant an idea or belief to be true... what concrete difference will its being true make in any one's life? How will the truth be realized? What experiences will be different from those which would obtain if the belief were false? What, in short, is the truth's cash-value in experiential terms?<sup>51</sup>

In answering these questions, the pragmatist says

True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify. False ideas are those that we cannot... This is the practical difference it makes to us to have true ideas; that, therefore, is the meaning of truth, for it is all that truth is known-as. The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made true by events. Its verity is in fact an event, a process: the process namely of its verifying itself, its verification. Its validity is the process of its validation.<sup>52</sup>



One can see that initially here, there seem to be no difference between the empiricist and the pragmatist. Clearly the difference is obvious between it and rationalism, but in the case of empiricism from which it takes its cue there is need for clarification to make a clear distinction. James does this clearly, but before taking this, it is even clear that certain germs of differences have been planted: the question about what difference a truth will make already transcends empiricism. It already acknowledges the existence of a truth, this suggesting that empiricist criterion of truth is dependent upon the correspondence theory of truth. But in this matter the pragmatist cannot be bothered, all that matters is that the proposition under consideration should make a difference even if it is false. And this is another plus on the side of pragmatism because it accounts for falsehood. This is the point where the pragmatist and empiricist use of 'verification' or 'validation' needs some consideration: While the empiricist means by those terms reference to experience or test in sense experience, the pragmatist says they

again signify certain *practical consequences* of the verified and validated idea... (because) the possession of true thoughts means everywhere possession of invaluable instruments of action...<sup>54</sup>

Elaborating on these points, James contends that the value of any truth are the practical results to which it leads. Aside from the practical importances of the objects of truth, everything else pales into insignificance:

it is useful because it is true or it is true because it is useful.<sup>55</sup>

These are the two sides of the truth equation; they are equivalent and mean exactly the same thing. Truth cannot be separated from usefulness because to say same thing is true and that it is not going to signal any difference is most imponderable. It is the use of a truth that completes its function in experience. According to James

From this simple cue pragmatism gets its general notion of truth as something essentially bound up with the way in which one moment in our experience may lead us towards other moments which it will be worthwhile to have been led to.<sup>56</sup>

For the pragmatist, then, the point at which he parts company with the empiricist is when the empiricist considers truth simply as what

corresponds to facts or coheres with a system of facts. Correspondence or coherence is irrelevant as far as the pragmatist is concerned. The ultimate point of seeking truth is not some abstract idea or concept called correspondence or coherence but what difference the issue being determined would make given my practical needs and goals. Truth is not eternally fixed to be approximated by the correspondence or coherence simpliciter. While those notions themselves might be useful, they are only true to the extent in which they serve the goal of shaping further experience for us. However, since science has shown that the sort of foundationalism which both rationalism and empiricism seeks cannot be sustained because of relativism-and Kantianism is not to be absolved here nor other less popular theories such as semantic and redundancy theories-it follows that there can be no truths in themselves. The only truths that there are, are only 'tools' of action and when they lose their value they cease to be tools, and consequently, no longer truths. But this is **not** the end of the matter, it (that is, pragmatism) goes even beyond relativism-not by denying relativism, but by constructing the truth of relativism as a function of what follows from its acceptance, Relativism is itself considered as a tool of action and it would not be valid unless it makes some difference. This is how powerful pragmatism is on all fronts-it is an appealing philosophy and 'theory' of truth for the free, liberated, empowered, scientific, individualistic and ambitious mind. It can ignore intrinsic and extrinsic values and ask to be shown what it shall profit a man to lose all his heritage in order to attain the pragmatic paradize. It is even machiavellian! It is the challenge of today and tomorrow? Can it transcend itself?

V.

**PRAGMATISM, HUMANITY, SCIENCE AND PHILOSOPHY :  
CONSEQUENCES OF THE DEATH OF THE PURSUIT OF TRUTH.**

There is no doubt that the human predicament is very disheartening: mankind turned away from mythology to break away from the shackles of dogma, intellectual bondage, abuse of knowledge and exploitation of the will to belief. Entering into philosophy he/she is met by a welcoming group of those who pride themselves with making it their duty to pursue wisdom, and by so doing arrive at the truth of things. For, what use is wisdom if it does not upbraid the intellect and enhance rational decision-making in favour of truth. But no sooner had mankind entered into this

sesame than she is confronted by a discordance of many and conflicting proclamations by those who will design it their business to be wise. Among these earliest philosophers, every brilliant breed they were, were to be counted the first relativists and sceptics with paradoxically liberating, because democratic, but incapacitating, because too pernicious, views about what there is, how they are to be known, and what truth, if any, our language can communicate about them.

Socrates' desire to draw man's attention to how little, if anything, man knows, is very enlightening but equally discouraging. While the sophistry of the itinerant teachers who exhort pay to teach people how to argue would not count as wisdom because they do not have truth enraptured in their intellectual portfolios, equally, the socratic questioning disclose no truth either, but is only a chastening device. And, this was most embarrassing to Plato, who Kantianly attempted a synergic reconciliation of empiricism and scepticism by looking toward the world of forms, thus placing truth, defined in absolute terms, beyond the reach of groping man. Neither can empiricism and science attain truth because of their limitations, nor can rationalism aspire any better because it lacks the power that an ideal observer, who knows all things eternally, can command. The sceptic on his own performs only useful service by drawing attention to these limitations, while the relativist, a resurgence of scientific reestablishment of the flux, shows how perspectives, goals, and time-space indicate what and how we know and relate to issue and show that ultimately Plato and Descartes and Aristotle and Hume all aspired to a temple they cannot build: There are no absolute truths, no eternal truths, only transient earth bounded truths: The only truths that exist are specific and can only be understood within specific domains—correspondence, coherence, semantic, redundancy, and all what not. Ultimately, there is an inverse sense, only inverse though, in which truth is opinion or belief: but this sounds ridiculous unless given an adequate interpretation. It is here that the pragmatist joins the stage and says that truth is usefulness and only in terms of what difference a truth makes is it to be understood.

Now, numerous issues arise which call for attention. The pragmatist has abandoned the need to tell us how to tell the truth, rather it has given us a means of measuring truth against the background of our goals and ends. Hence one could ask: If truth is not objective, does not inhere intrinsically in statements, how are we to determine their usefulness? The

pragmatist will answer by saying: No, you do not want to know that it is true or false; all you want to find out is what difference it would make, if it were true, then it will lead to certain consequences, if false, to others. If we then ask, granted that we have to act in spite of our not having access to objective, eternal truth, is usefulness value free? That is, if relativism-philosophical relativism which is supervenient on scientific, evolutionary, relativism-is valid and leads to useful consequences when adopted in action, hence true, is pragmatism also relativistic, meaning usefulness for who considers and adopts it? If there are no enduring truths and objective values, can pragmatism conduce to a human society that marries instrumentality of hypotheses-what truth has become-and human happiness? Who determines usefulness and for what? It seems to me that pragmatism is helpless on this pass.

There is no doubt that a main goal of the search for truth is the facilitation of action-and action can only be facilitated by rules that conduce to conduct and success. In this regard, pragmatism is useful. But it led to an abandonment of hard and fast pursuit of principles in favour of rule of the thumb in human affairs while it attained the highest level of vigour, precision and equated technological conquest of nature and man with truth. By refusing to participate in the search for truth, but seeking to try out various proposals and options it led to philosophies that abandoned the raising of fundamental questions in favour of apologetics, logic chopping and sterile intellectualism and professionalism. While pragmatism sought initially to bring philosophy within the reach of the people, it drove it beyond their comprehension because it made philosophy irrelevant once it had provided a guide to action. Do not ask what value a hypothesis has but what difference it makes.

There is no doubt that this essay stared on a contentious note: it has a contentious title and designed a polemical programme for the audience. It would not be out of tune to end on an even more contentious note- if it can engender greater attention to truth and value, it would have performed a pragmatic critic of pragmatism. Hence, we may conclude with a cluster of opaquely related questions:

Granting that relativism means no absolutes, does it mean licentiousness? Why has truth disappeared and whither has it disappeared-

- (a) hiding endangered and almost extinct peoples and other species away from the conscience of mankind?

- (b) leading policies (often deleterious) under high-sounding, emotion-laden phraseology and diction?
- (c) cloaking dictatorship, oppression and subjugation in garments of democracy and benevolent rulership?
- (d) allowing the same event to mean good and bad, victory and defeat, etc.
- (e) etc. etc.

While we all want to get on with the business of living, while for truth to have meaning it has to conduce to action (usually beneficial to some person or group of persons), while science has encountered numerous wheelclogging perversions and misdirections, there remain numerous issues to be discussed. The discussion, in an open universal community of inquiry, in which all partake, would evidently conduce to the realization that the relativity of truth is not an unbridled excuse to make utility the master. This is all the more necessary because even those transient truths are of greater value ultimately than those transient uses or usefulness that the pragmatist unwittingly invites to displace truth. Our acknowledgement of the cognitive limitations-which ultimately is the main tool to determine truth or falsehood-of mankind is both a necessary factor that shows truth and utility as necessary partners with different roles in the task of human survival.<sup>57</sup>

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#### Notes and References

1. Virtually all historical accounts of the origin of philosophy enclose the "official doctrine" that philosophy originated in ancient Greece. This view supposes that philosophy, defined as "love of wisdom" (and elucidated as the critical and speculative application of reason to elicit and solve profound problems) was suddenly brought about by Thales, thus, suggesting that no philosophy took place in the various

civilizations before Thales, and that critical thought and concern with fundamental problems, were absent in such cultures. It is the view of this writer that this is a cliché that, due to the repetition and dogmatism of its acceptance, has attained the status of a truth worth examining if the errant Ghost of Hellenic origin of philosophy is to be laid. This is a task being pursued in another project, but since truth-per pragmatism and empiricism is the concern of this essay, it needs be mentioned that the cliché is one that lacks empirical foundation (given evidences thus far amassed) but which has pragmatic utility of defending and maintaining a perilous vestige of a fantasy of superiority of western culture.

2. The caveat emplaced has the advantage, if taken in the context of the discussion that follows, of assuaging an expectation that all relevant issues-facts, ideas, etc.-can be taken cognisance of all at the same time. The issues related to whether one could be wise without knowing the truth is discussed in another fora, but it should be noted here that being wise does not mean knowing the truth, and this is what the pragmatist seeks to endorse.
3. This is to be understood in the light of the above (note 1).
4. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1011b, 25-28.
5. W.V. Quine, *Philosophy of Logic*, 2nd Edition, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, (1970), 1986, p.1.
6. W.V. Quine & J.S. Ullian, *The Web of Belief*, New York, Random House, (1970), 1978, 2nd Edition, p.13.
7. S. Wolfram, *Philosophical Logic: An Introduction*, London, Routledge, 1989, p. 129.
8. *Ibid.* pp. 141-143.
9. M. Dummett, *Truth and other Enigmas*, London, Duckworth Ltd, 1978, p.6.
10. *Ibid.* p.6.
11. A. O'Hear, *What Philosophy Is*, London Penguin Books, 1985, pp. 87-88.
12. *Ibid.* p.88.
13. W. James, *Pragmatism*, New York, Meridian Books, 1955, p.237. cf. S. Wolfram, *Philosophical Logic*, op.cit. p.151, where it was said it is "The Correspondence theory which says that to describe a statement as true is to say that it corresponds with or accords with the facts."
14. *Ibid.* p.147.
15. *Ibid.* p.133. Even though one may not immediately see the point of saying an idea, proposition, sentence, etc. 'becomes true', one cannot but concede the validity of this description of what I have called the "truthification" process, particularly when it concerns beliefs, theories, etc. This is a crucial factor which further endorses the correspondence theory of truth.

16. B.J.F. Lonergan, S.J., *Insight*, London, Longmans, 1957, p.549.
17. *Ibid.*, p.552.
18. W. James, *Pragmatism, op. cit.*, p.143.
19. *Ibid.*, p.243.
20. L. Armour, *The Concept of Truth*, Assen, Van Gorcum and Co, 1969, p.81. cf. S. Wolfram, *Philosophical Logic, op. cit.*, p.151
21. L. Bonjour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1985, pp.9 ff. Armour accurately represents this worry when she says... the problem about truth has been shifted in a highly peculiar way. We started out wanting to know how men could tell the truth—conceiving of truth as something which we might succeed or fail in telling but something which was, in an important sense, added to the world by some human activity. It was this activity which we wanted to judge and for which we, therefore, needed criteria.  
  
What has happened as the theory has developed is that the problem has, by some subtlety, run away from us so that we now find that we are getting an account of a special world which is independent of us and which stands between us and the states of affairs which we wanted to get at. See Leslie Armour, *The Concept of Truth, op.cit.*, p.51.
22. G. Santayana, "The Genteel Tradition" in Morton White, *Documents in the History of American Philosophy*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1972, p.414.
23. A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, London, Penguin Books, 1971, pp. 85-86.
24. F.P. Ramsey, *The Foundations of Mathematics and other Essays*, London, OUP, 1931. See Chapter VI entitled 'Facts and Propositions'. This line of reasoning can be traced to Kant who argued that existence is not a predicate, thus converted, truth is not a predicate that adds or detracts from a proposition.
25. S. Wolfram, *Philosophical Logic, op.cit.*, p.157. An elaborate and to my mind, successful argument is made to show that the theory is not correct is provided in sections 4.1 ff in the book.
26. *Ibid.*, p.157.
27. M. Dummett, *Truth and Other Enigmas, op.cit.*, p.14.
28. W. James, *Pragmatism, op. cit.*, p.230.
29. *Ibid.*, p.42
30. W. James, *Pragmatism*, p.43. James quotes this passage from C.S. Peirce "How to make our ideas clear" in *Popular Science Monthly*, January 1878.
31. William James, *Pragmatism, op.cit.*, p.137.
32. *Ibid.*, P.133.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 135.
34. *Ibid.*, p.137.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 134.
36. *Ibid.*, p.135.
37. *Ibid.*, p.138.
38. *Ibid.*, p.22.
39. In the *Meno* Plato propounded the doctrine of *anamnesis* or recollection, though he later abandoned it for the theory of Forms. Descartes also supported such a theory in *Meditation II* where he argued for innate ideas.
40. R. Descartes, *Meditation III* in E. Anscombe and P.T. Geach (eds) *Philosophical Writings*, G. Britain, Nelson Paperbacks, 1970, pp.76. ff.
41. E.M. Conford, *The Republic of Plato*, London, OUP, 1945, Book VI, 505-509B.
42. W. James, *Pragmatism, op.cit.*, p.22.
43. *Ibid.*, p.133.
44. James L. Christian, *Philosophy : An Introduction to the Art of Wondering*, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977, p.537.
45. L.Von Bertalanffy, *Robots, Men and Minds*, New York, George Brazillar, 1967, p.92 cf M. Polanyi's discussion of the personal coefficient in the task of knowledge acquisition in *Personal Knowledge*, London, Routledge and K. Paul Ltd, 1973, p.303.
46. *Ibid.*, p.94.
47. J.L. Christian, *Philosophy, op.cit.*, p.537.
48. *Ibid.*, p.42.
49. J. Rajchman and C. West, (eds), *Post-Analytic Philosophy*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1985, Chapters 1,2,8,9 and 11.
50. J.L. Christian, *Philosophy, op.cit.*, p.233.
51. W. James, *Pragmatism, op.cit.*, p.133.
52. *Ibid.*, p.133.
53. *Ibid.*, p.133.
54. *Ibid.*, p.134.
55. *Ibid.*, p.135.
56. *Ibid.*, p.135.
57. I wish to acknowledge the thorough and useful comments, questions and corrections of Mrs. Ed. Brandon on the draft of this paper, particularly with regard to the interpretation of Dummett's work and the logical issues raised in the essay. Whatever errors remain are mine to bear, not his.