

The Coherence Theory of Truth

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Pre-lecture reading:

Davidson, Donald (1986), 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge', in E. LePore (ed.) *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell), pp. 307-19.

1. According to the correspondence theory of truth, truth is *correspondence*: for a proposition to be true is for it to correspond to a fact.

According to the coherence theory of truth, truth is *coherence*: for a proposition to be true is for it to cohere with a set of propositions.

2. Why move from correspondence to coherence?
 - (a) It's more acceptable to idealists (if there are any) who deny that there are such things as facts for propositions to correspond to. For an idealist, reality is something like a collection of beliefs, and there is nothing more for a belief to be compared with than other beliefs.
 - (b) The epistemological concern - we can't know that a proposition corresponds to a fact, but we can know that it coheres with other propositions.
3. Two questions about the formulation of the coherence theory:

What is it to cohere?

To which set of propositions is a proposition to cohere?

4. **What is it to cohere?**

(Cohere₁) For the proposition p to cohere with the set of propositions S is for p to be consistent with S.

(Cohere₂) For the proposition p to cohere with the set of propositions S is for p to be entailed by S.

Each of these notions seems to require that S be a *consistent* set. For if S is not consistent then:

(i) according to cohere₁ *nothing* is true.

(ii) according to cohere₂ *everything* is true.

Each of these notions also seems to require that S be *not too small*. For if S contains just the proposition that grass is green, for example, then:

(i) according to cohere₁, both the proposition that snow is white is true, and the proposition that snow is not white is true.

(ii) according to cohere₂, neither the proposition that snow is white is true, nor the proposition that snow is not white is true.

So each seems to require that S be a large set of consistent propositions.

5. **Which set of propositions?**
- (a) The set of true propositions?
 - (b) The set of propositions believed by Chloe?
 - (c) The set of propositions believed by our community?
 - (d) The largest consistent set of propositions believed by our community?
 - (e) The largest consistent set of propositions that will be believed by our community at the end of inquiry?
 - (f) The set of propositions that would be believed by an omniscient being?
6. A worry: can we state the position clearly without appealing to the notion of truth?
7. **Davidson** thinks that truth is correspondence, not coherence. But he argues (in the pre-lecture reading) that 'coherence yields correspondence', in the following sense: Our beliefs are mostly true, so any belief that coheres with many of our beliefs is more than likely true.

His argument for why our beliefs are mostly true (at least as I understand it):

1. We find a native in the jungle speaking a language we do not know, and we want to interpret him - discover what his words mean.
2. We succeed in doing so by holding up things and uttering his words and prompting his assent or dissent. (This is called *radical interpretation*.)
3. Notice: we find his beliefs to mostly agree with ours. If not, we would not be able to interpret him.
4. So what? Our beliefs might be mostly mistaken, and hence so might the native's.
5. But an omniscient interpreter could do the same for us, and he would find our beliefs to mostly agree with hers. But her beliefs are all true, so she would find our beliefs mostly true. But she is omniscient, so our beliefs *are* mostly true.

Additional reading:

James O. Young, 'The Coherence Theory of Truth', *SEOP*.