



The Meaning of Truth

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Preeminent American philosopher and educator John Dewey (1859-1952) rejected Hegelian idealism for the pragmatism of William James.

In this collection of informal, highly readable essays, originally published between 1897 and 1909, Dewey articulates his now classic philosophical concepts of knowledge and truth and the nature of reality. Here Dewey introduces his scientific method and uses critical intelligence to reject the traditional ways of viewing philosophical discourse. Knowledge cannot be divorced from experience; it is gradually acquired through interaction with nature. Philosophy, therefore, has to be regarded as itself a method of knowledge and not as a repository of disembodied, pre-existing absolute truths.

The Meaning of Truth Details

Date : Published May 1st 1997 by Prometheus Books (first published 1909)

ISBN : 9781573921381

Author : William James

Format : Paperback 297 pages

Genre : Philosophy, Psychology, Nonfiction, Classics

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Perry Whitford says

What a quant, old-fashioned concept Truth has become.

Difficult as it might seem to believe for anyone presently under the age of twenty, people actually used to care about Truth. Loosely termed here by James as meaning an '*agreement with reality*,' you can understand immediately why Truth has gone out of fashion in the era of fake news and rampant online conspiracy garbage.

I just had to get that off my chest, sorry about that. This collection of essays, speeches, and vigorous defenses of his theory of pragmatism as it relates to the question of Truth is very much a philosophical work, not a political one.

Pragmatism stood opposed to idealism and rationalism as a new theory about thought. James and his school asserted that the act of knowing was not static but active, continuously '*making itself valid*' from concept to percept or wherever it terminates inbetween.

James was a humanist, so the idea of a perfect God or an ideal, Platonic universe weren't enough for him. We have to play our active part. As such then, *'Truth we conceive to mean everywhere, not duplication, but addition; not the constructing of inner copies of already complete realities, but rather the collaborating with realities so as to bring about a clearer result.'*

Phrases like '*working*,' '*expedient*,' and '*cash value*' led critics to suggest that pragmatism only involved practical truths and not conceptual ones, a conclusion which James equally regrets and derides here. The brief lecture on how the mind perceives things which aren't there ('The Tigers in India') should have put that to bed.

More than once James had cause to rue his inadequacy in describing his meaning, his '*stumbling language*.' I took this to more than mere modesty, for he really was deficient in making himself clear if this book is anything to go by. His language is inelegant, his analogies not always particularly useful (the one about two people's idea of a dog springs to mind).

Not that I'm completely at home with the language of philosophy. That said, judging from the number of people James takes to task for who misunderstanding pragmatism I'm not the only one who found him to be insufficiently clear.

Bridget says

This is available online at

Manuel Rodriguez Acosta says

William James “Meaning of Truth”, which further elaborates on his writings about truth in “Pragmatism” is, from a pragmatic and logical point of view, quite the achievement. James windings through the thought process of anti-pragmatists is something to behold. As with his other works, James greatly contributes to the field of epistemology.

A says

The introduction of the book by H. S. Thayer gives an insight of James's previous book *Pragmatism* which is intended as a sequel to *The Meaning of Truth*.

Jana Light says

In this collection of short, rather informal essays, William James responds to critics of his presentation of truth in his prior book, *Pragmatism* where he defines truth as a relation of concepts to facts or realities. On his account, the existence of “truth” depends on there being a knower or conceptualizer – otherwise, all we have are the facts and realities. Truth is inherently humanistic, subject-dependent, and experiential, and each truth necessitates determined “workings out” of its consequences (both empirically and intellectually).

Unfortunately, not having read *Pragmatism* (and I would highly recommend reading it first), James’ account of truth read a little piecemeal and disjointed, and was also a little repetitive. I actually like his definition of truth and want to read his formal account of it and read the papers challenging his definition.

This brings me to what I think is the most interesting and valuable part of the book: it gives the reader a peek into the intellectual conversations and informal debates between the greatest philosophical minds of the day (James himself, Russell, Schiller, Hawtrey, etc.). Even considering the work as a series of conversations, however, the book is woefully one-sided. We only get James’ contributions and only come to know the argument of the other philosophers as presented and interpreted by James. It is inescapably incomplete, to the detriment of examining the larger issue of epistemology and belief.

As always, I was struck by how James prefigured the science of psychology, and his defense of his account of truth certainly reflects his interest in the workings of the brain and how it influences belief (and how our beliefs influence our actions or wellbeing). Definitely worth a read for a James enthusiast or someone wanting to get an inside view of how his account was received in the larger philosophical community of his day. It serves as a nice bibliography.
