

A Model of Human Thought: Philosophy

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What does it mean for something to be true?

What can we do to verify that something is true?

How can we discover new truths?

This article is about a conceptual model of truth that may help answer these questions. I'm personally motivated to consider these questions because I'd like to re-evaluate the scientific method — the search for truth.

I'll argue that this line of pursuit aligns with an understanding of human thought itself. As a result, these questions also pertain to another deep interest of mine, which is writing software that we would recognize as a person.

1 A traditional view

The usual view of truth is that an idea is true exactly when it corresponds to the actual state of the world. A concept you need to bundle along with any definition of truth is a concept of what kinds of things are candidates for truth; previous philosophers have argued that suitable *sentences* or *propositions* are good candidates for truth. The word *suitable* here refers to the need to avoid tricky cases such as “*This sentence is false.*” I won’t dwell on the tricky cases because I think they are mostly a distraction from the meat of the issue.

The reason I’m not a fan of this definition is that it doesn’t really explain much. It doesn’t tell us how we can verify truthiness. We’re left asking what it means to correspond to the state of the world. It seems to simply exchange one word for a few more without helping us learn anything new in the process.

Rather than arguing that this semi-tautological perspective is *wrong*, I’ll simply provide another that I think is more useful. Consider it the difference between Roman numerals and our usual Arabic base-10 decimal notation. It’s harder to do long division with Roman numerals, whereas the structure of a number captured by base-10 notation is *useful* — it enables us to take certain actions that might be more difficult with other notations, even though it adds no new information. This is the kind of *usefulness* I’m arguing exists in an alternative model of truth.

2 A practical view

(truth is what is effective; cf relevant / completely true / social/authority) (degrees of truthiness) (the idea of truth itself as a useful fiction)

(Charles Pierce / Karl Popper)

2.0.1 Isn't it true even if no one knows it?

What would that even mean? (want a good analogy)

3 A model of thought

(goals / questions / answers / actions) (actions as proofs / algorithms)

4 A bigger picture

(philosophy as humanity's relationship with the world, not about the world itself)

(David Hume, Descartes)

(aim to close with the big picture idea and some argument as to why)