What is Truth?
By: Shaun Ho

*What is snow?*

The anthropologist, Franz Boas captured the imagination of the public when he claimed in his 1911 book, *Handbook of American Indian Languages*, that the Inuits had developed an extraordinarily broad range of vocabulary to describe the snow that they encountered. Where anglophones stop at generalities like 'snow' and 'sleet', the Inuit people have, through necessity, adopted a whole range of words that describes at a more granular level the broad spectrum of possible experiences that could occur within their environment:

> *"...the words for SNOW in Eskimo, may be given. Here we find one word,* aput*, expressing SNOW ON THE GROUND; another one,* qana*, FALLING SNOW; a third one,* piqsirpoq*, DRIFTING SNOW; and a fourth one,* qimuqsuq*, A SNOWDRIFT..."*
>
> *(Emphasis as original)*

Over the past century, Boas's findings have morphed into urban legend, with some accounts suggesting that over a hundred and twenty of such words are used by the Inuits to describe various states of frozen water. While the exact breadth of the vocabulary remains disputed between linguists and anthropologists, the broader principle that can be derived from such an anecdote is undisputable – that our vocabulary is sometimes too simple to capture all the nuances of the subject matter it attempts to embody and communicate.

Given the great variety of contexts in which our references to the truth take place, it would only be appropriate to apply the above insight to the current discussion on what the truth is by extending the analogy of the Inuit 'snow' to our understanding of the word 'truth'.

*There is no one 'truth'*

Viewed in this context, a more germane way to answer the question arises: To highlight that the lenses through which we can view the truth are various, and thus, different circumstances and cases give rise to differing classes of truth that exist in our minds but are not yet accorded more specificity by our limited mental vocabulary: The correspondent-truth, coherent-truth, and the consensus-truth. Thus defeating the assumption that a singular truth exists whose qualities can be discussed. Having established that the word truth carries multiple meanings, it can then be concluded that much like what 'snow' would be to an Inuit, what the truth should be to us depends only on what exactly we refer to at any particular point in time. The question, "What is Truth?" thus proves itself to be a semantic one rather than one that demands some intimidating or obscure form of higher knowledge.

## **Part I – The word 'truth' could mean many things**

*Of what truly is in reality: Truth through correspondence*

The most sensible way to approach the subject would be to tackle the most intuitive idea of truth – as being "what really is" – first, and as such, we turn to the idea of correspondence. It will be shown that correspondence cannot fully embody our idea of truth – giving rise to the implication that no singular truth exists whose qualities can be debated.

The theory elucidates our fundamental intuitions toward the reality that we live in, and does so by contending that truth arises when any statement, belief, or other form of position that we take – otherwise known as a truthbearer – accurately describes facts or state of affairs in the world as it is[1]. Of the various models of it that have been proposed, the semantic and object-based ones matter most to maintaining the basic functions of daily life.

The former model posits that a truthbearer is true if and only if reality corresponds to the words that it signifies. For example, "it rained today" would only be true if it did rain in the specific geographical area in reference. The latter allows us to attach values and qualities to objects in a subject-predicate structure, allowing us to communicate with greater precision by assigning characteristics – "the cat is black", or, "the water is extremely hot".[2]

It is therefore evident that the factual truth that we attempt to refer to most commonly would better serve us if we referred to it specifically as 'truth through correspondence' or 'correspondent-truth'. Such a term will quell unnecessary anxiety toward questions of fact, such as "Who killed the samurai in *Rashomon*?" and lead us to avoid regressing into a state of unknowingness.

A major limitation implicit in the premise of correspondence is that the determination of truth depends on some form of factual verification that has to occur before one can be confident in the truth of any premise. Therefore, any individual must go through the pains of personally verifying every individual truthbearer that he relies on before he can believe in the integrity of its truth. That this is so is not the limitation; the limitation is that such a theory and its implications simply do not explain how society has continued to function and progress even though every individual has not, for instance, personally scaled Mount Everest to know that its height truly is 8,848 metres. As such, what the truth is cannot be assumed to be solely personal correspondence, defeating the assumption that the word 'truth' represents a single idea.

*Of knowledge without personal verification: Truth through consensus*

The gap in coverage that correspondence creates can be filled by the creation of a new class of truth which arises when members of society derive truth by arriving at a consensus on certain facts, or by relying on and trusting in the consensus of some qualified sub-communities that are perceived to be competent enough to establish the truth of a matter. The process each member went through to arrive at the conclusion does not matter; the outcome of consensus is sufficient for such truths to operate. Let us refer to truth arising in these circumstances specifically as 'truth through consensus' or 'consensus-truth'. We thus conclude that the word 'truth' embodies at least two different forms of knowledge at the same time.

Truth through consensus has been known to come into operation in specific situations where the correspondent truth is not immediately available, but is still important for the furtherance of some ends. This is most evident in the realm of scientific knowledge, where the principle of reproduction of results holds sway in determining whether or not a certain hypothesis, like global warming, shall be deemed to be true for the purposes of influencing environmental and economic policy.

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[1] https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/truth-correspondence/. Accessed 11 Sept 2018
[2] *Ibid*

The circumstances under which consensus-truth is most likely to contribute to the body of 'known truths' are limited. In an extremely unequal world, much effort has to be put into establishing four elements of reliable consensus in what is known as the ideal-speech situation:

> *1. No one capable of making a relevant contribution is to be excluded,*
> *2. participants have an equal voice,*
> *3. participants are free to speak their honest opinion without*
> *deception, and*
> *4. there are no sources of coercion built into process and procedures*
> *of discourse.*

*Adapted from the work of Jürgen Habermas*

Owing to the enormous costs involved in creating this artificial world of power parity in a very unequal world, consensus-truths tend only to emerge in areas where the social interest in finding the truth exceed this high cost. This limits the circumstances under which consensus-truths operate to controlled environments like scientific research and fact-finding jury panels. Nonetheless, they still do make up a different category from correspondent-truths and should be treated as such.

Unique as they may be as a category and useful as they are to the argument that no one truth exists, consensus-truths still do not completely cover the limitations of correspondence in wholly representing our multi-faceted understanding of the word 'truth'. This is because it does not differ in any material aspects from correspondent-truths; they are merely a means of affirming correspondence. The framework that undergirds the idea of consensus still refers to factual, correspondent truths. As such, the discussion so far limits the truth to the factual realm and ignores the role of subjective value judgments as the keystone of human decision-making. For a more complete exposition of the various types of truths, we must turn to the normative statements that govern our behaviour, which are regarded to be as good as true, but yet cannot possibly fall under the strictly 'factual' class of statements that correspondent-truths and coherence-truths deal with.

*Of the subjective values that guide our choices: Truth through coherence*

We thus turn to the third of many unique ideas that are represented by the word 'truth'. The ascribing of truth-value to normative, non-falsifiable statements can be better explained by their coherence with some *specified set* of propositions that are perceived to be decisive authority, thus giving rise to our third class of truth – "truth through coherence", or "coherent-truth". While it would be appropriate here to discuss how certain moral values can be decided to be true based on comparison with socially authoritative religious texts (the *specified set*) like the Bible or the Quran, it would be far easier and more relevant in today's increasingly secular times to prove the existence of coherent-truths by using the common law as an example.

The codification of key social principles in the common law both affirm and create moral truths through coherence, reconciling subjective truths where (decidedly objective theories of) correspondence and consensus cannot. This is achieved through the doctrine of *stare decisis* which binds lower courts to the previous decisions of courts higher up in the hierarchy in any given jurisdiction, effectively creating and adding on to a *'specified set'* of past cases from higher courts that future courts must refer to when deciding questions that ultimately hinge on unfalsifiable value judgments. For instance, a normative statement – such as the position that

"we should love our neighbours as we love ourselves" gain coherent-truth value when expressed as a legal principle, the *duty of care*, and subsequently affirmed by a wide body of case law, which in the case of the neighbour principle, starts from *Donoghue v Stevenson* in 1932. The incremental codification of legal principles in each case adds to an ever-increasing *'specified set'* of case law which ultimately renders true the attitudes of mutual respect, justice, and fairness, and makes them the benchmark for future judicial decisions, which preserve social cohesion in any civilised society.

As such, we can conclude that the ability to account for our perception of non-falsifiable, normative statements makes coherent-truths unique from correspondent-truths and consensus-truths, and thus, that at least three different ideas exist that can be implied by the same word, 'truth'.

## Part II: Implications on the question

*The issue of semantics*

> *"We conclude, then, that there is no problem of truth as it is ordinarily conceived. The traditional conception of truth as a "real quality" or a "real relation" is due, like most philosophical mistakes, to a failure to analyse sentences correctly. There are sentences... in which the word "truth" seems to stand for something real; and this leads the speculative philosopher to enquire what this "something" is. Naturally he fails to obtain a satisfactory answer, since his question is illegitimate. For our analysis has shown that the word "truth" does not stand for anything, in the way which such a question requires."*
>
> *A J Ayer*: Language, Truth, and Logic

Having established that the word 'truth' can refer to at least three different concepts, and having gone through in detail the precise circumstances in which each conception of truth arises,we can thus conclude that there need not be a difficult answer to the question of what the truth is. One only need to recognise that truth is not a singular mental landform as our language suggests it to be; it is in fact a landscape made up of sharp contours whose details and particulars can only be brought into sharp relief when light is cast upon it from many different angles. It is correspondent when we refer to facts, consensus-based when we refer to and rely on the findings of learned men and women, and coherent when we refer to the values that define and guide our actions.

*Concluding thoughts*

What the 'truth' is to an anglophone changes depending on the demands of the situation at hand**.** At least three different concepts are embodied by the same word, 'truth'. Therefore, as 'snow' is to the Inuits, so should 'truth' be to us.