

## **A PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS OF THE PRAGMATIC THEORY OF TRUTH AS A SYNERGY FOR THE COHERENCE AND CORRESPONDENCE THEORIES OF TRUTH**

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### **Abstract**

*The focus of every epistemic discourse is to identify and decipher knowledge that is not tainted, but directed towards truth. The process could be through leading-in ideas to already established truth to either concretize or modify the existing truth. The knowledge gotten from either of the media is scrutinized through practical application by the pragmatic theory of truth and manifested by a classical belief that has survived the test of time and experience, whose substructure is fundamentally an identification of what one claims to have conceived in the mind with actual reality. This research seeks to find a place of synergy for both correspondence and coherent theories of truth in the pragmatic theory of truth. It argues that both the coherence and the correspondence theories of truth find no expression except what is claimed to be true is made applicable, workable, practicable, instrumental and with cash value. It is from this perspective that the researcher evaluates the views and draws the conclusion that the synergy of the coherence and correspondence theories of truth is only possible and explicit in the pragmatic theory of truth.*

**Keywords:** Pragmatism, Correspondence, Coherent, Synergy, Truth

### **INTRODUCTION**

There are three traditional theories of truth. They are the coherence theory of truth, the correspondence theory of truth and the pragmatic theory. Other notable theories of truth apart from the traditional theories are: the semantic theory, Saul Kripke's theory, Karl Popper's theory, the redundancy theory, the performative theory, the prosentential theory, *et cetera*. The traditional theories of truth serve as bases for other theories in that they sum up all that other theories talk about implicitly. It therefore suffices to say that other theories of truth are offshoots of the traditional theories of truth. Pragmatism is a concept that has one single meaning and a diversity of perspectives. It was derived from the Greek word, *'pragma'* meaning, "action" or "affair." It was first used by the Greek historian, *Polybius* (circa 118BCE), who called his writings

"pragmatic," meaning thereby that they were intended to be instructive and useful to his readers.<sup>1</sup>

Pragmatism, according to the Oxford Advanced Learner's dictionary, is "thinking about solving problems in a practical and sensible (visible/perceivable) way rather than by having fixed ideas and theories."<sup>2</sup> It is the conglomeration of ideas into what is obtainable. To be pragmatic is to possess the prowess of putting to practice what is conceivable in order to exercise power in the pursuit of practical and specific objectives like adding new knowledge geared towards solving existential problems. Pragmatism stresses the priority of action over doctrine, of experience over fixed principles, and it holds that ideas borrow their meanings from their consequences and their truth from their verification. Thus, ideas/beliefs prelude pragmatism, and so are sole instruments and plans for pragmatism (action).

Pragmatism is an American philosophy that originated in the 1870s (a time of religious, social, economic and intellectual turmoil in America) but became popular in the twentieth century. The word pragmatism originally comes from the Latin word *pragmaticus*, and the Greek word, *pragmatikos*, both meaning deed.<sup>3</sup> It emanated as a part of a general revolt against the overly intellectual, somewhat fastidious and closed systems of idealism in the Nineteenth century philosophy,<sup>4</sup> especially as a revolt against the “*cogito ergo sum*” of Rene Descartes, and Hegelianism. It does not posit any totally strange idea but harnesses the distorted, pristine replication of epistemic discourses to ensure that whatever is admitted as truth must possess practical consequences. Without this practical consequence, ideas and beliefs are vague. Hence, “it is in the question of the practical consequence of a thing, discourse, belief and ideas that the principle of pragmatism is depicted and expounded.”<sup>5</sup> Emphatically, there is absolutely nothing new in pragmatism except for the pragmatic method, geared towards solving problems by following each idea practically. It was championed by Charles Sander Peirce, reconstructed by Williams James, and pushed forward by John Dewey. Others that were influenced by pragmatism include W.V. Quine, George H. Mead, C. I. Lewis, FCS Schiller, Sidney Hooke, *et cetera*. Pragmatism could be seen in two major waves, the classical era of Peirce, James and Dewey, and the post Deweyan era of Sidney and others.

From the perspective of pragmatism, the truth or meaning of an idea or a proposition lies in its observable practical consequences rather than in any metaphysical attributes. It can be summarized with the phrase ‘whatever works, is true,’ and because reality changes, whatever works could also change; thus, truth could also be regarded as changeable and, by implication, no one can claim to possess any final or ultimate truth.<sup>6</sup>

There are three staunch proponents of the philosophy of pragmatism, namely Charles Sander Peirce, Williams James and John Dewey. Their views will be considered in this work.

Peirce, in his pragmatic theory of meaning, after refuting Descartes account of meaning, took advantage of the law of perception to posit that the scientific method should be adopted in order to arrive at a clear meaning of a belief without the influence of metaphysics. He submits that belief and truth are inseparable just as truth and reality are intertwined. He states that to think of the true conception of X and to think of X as real is simply to regard one and the same thing from two different points of view, for the immediate object of thought in a true judgment is the reality. He concludes by positing that all our beliefs will continue to be fallible until we arrive at the unassailable doubt which may never be attained.<sup>7</sup> He holds that there is nothing beyond the grasp of human.

James expressed his pragmatism and his pragmatic theory of truth with the notion of the ‘cash value of truth.’ For him, truth is what works, what gives satisfaction or the practical consequences of our beliefs (utility).<sup>8</sup> By that, James is not saying that ‘workability’ is an indicator that a belief is true, rather, workability is the pragmatic definition of what it means for a belief to be true. A stringent characteristic of a true belief is practical cash value. For him, a belief is not true unless one acts to make it true. Thus, an idea is true because it is useful and an idea is useful because it is true. He equally advocates the fallibilism of Peirce. For James, any idea that is true must be one that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify.<sup>9</sup>

Succinctly, William James made some important changes to the pragmatic understanding of truth. The most important was probably the alteration of the public character of truth which Pierce argued for. Pierce focused first and foremost on scientific experimentation of truth, then, depended upon practical consequences that would be observed by a community of scientists.

James, however, moved this process of belief-formation, application, experimentation, and observation to the very personal level of each individual. Thus, a belief became “truth” when it proved to have practical utility in the life of a single individual. He expected that a person would take the time to “act as if” a belief were true and then see what happened if it proved useful, helpful, and productive; then it should indeed be regarded as “true” after all.

Instrumentalism is Dewey’s version of pragmatism from which standpoint he posits that “ideas are tools for solving problems and shaping our environment to our ends.”<sup>10</sup> Against the background of the influence of Charles Darwin’s biological evolution published in 1859 when Dewey was born, Dewey goes on to posit in his theory of inquiry that perplexing situation leads to inquiry and experimentation. This succeeds his earlier submission that experimentation takes place within a specific situation in which our ability to successfully interact with our environment has broken down. The notion of instrumentalism bridges the lacuna between science and value thus, hanging along Dewey’s logic and ethical analysis and criticisms. A suggestive and vital feature of this theory for Dewey is that while the subject matters of scientific inquiry, moral and social experience differ, the method and forms of thought functioning in the experimental determination of future consequences do not differ in kind.<sup>11</sup> This is to say that ideas have a somewhat position in any experimental success made.

### **THE CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS OF COHERENCE AND CORRESPONDENCE THEORIES OF TRUTH**

The coherence theory precludes the correspondence theory. The coherence theory deals solely with ideas in the mind. It occurs insofar as one had conceived or has an already existing concept in mind; anything in line or that tallies with the pull of orientation in the mind, the mind in its prowess (as replete in Kantian categories of the mind) groups it into the pull of orientation it coheres with. In this wake of thought, Ezebuilo avows that “coherence theories take truth to consist in relations of coherence among a set of beliefs... the test for truth consists of relations among beliefs themselves... it is because the meaning of the words are internally related.”<sup>12</sup> From the point of view of Ezebuilo, therefore, it suffices to say that, firstly, the *modus operandi* of the coherence theory lies in consistency of beliefs or ideas; and secondly, the justification of the truth gained from this theory of truth lies in the coherence or concordance of the ideas or beliefs; hence, the notion of *coherentism*. Furthermore, many of our beliefs, for Lemos, seem to be reasonable or justified in virtue of the fact that they cohere. He expresses it thus:

... a mother brings her young son, Adam, to the doctor. The child complains that he does not feel well. Upon examination, the doctor finds out that the boy has fever, red spots on his skin, and feels itchy.

Suppose the doctor also recalls that many children at Adam’s school have had measles. The doctor immediately forms the belief that Adam has the measles. Again, suppose a detective forms a belief that Smith stole some missing objects on the basis that Smith’s fingerprints were found at the scene, that witnesses saw Smith in the area at the time of the crime, and that the stolen object was found in Smith’s room.<sup>13</sup>

The belief of the detective that Smith stole the missing object coheres with all the circumstantial evidences given above; likewise the doctor’s belief that Adam has measles coheres with the rest of his ideas or beliefs. Succinctly, the view of the coherence theory of

truth is that a belief is true in so far as it coheres, as evident in the above instances. Two forms of the coherence theory have been revealed from the above instances; the *positive* and the *negative coherence*. Whereas the positive coherence comes to limelight when a belief is supported on balance by one's whole or total beliefs, the negative coherence occurs when a belief conflicts with one's other beliefs.<sup>14</sup>

Nonetheless, this theory has been refuted vehemently as coherence and consistency, when held tenaciously, lead to *circularity*, where one finds it difficult to differentiate between a true and false statement due to the consistency and coherence of the presenter. Moreover, beliefs could contradict one another, and so, the question of objective belief creeps in. This may lead to a consistency in error and probably to an epistemic error, *Epistemicide*. It is in an attempt to address this loophole found with the coherence theory that the correspondence theory was excogitated.

The correspondence theory could be seen as a theory that supplies the lack inherent in the coherence theory as it reveals the idea in the mind by matching it with the realities around, either actually or still in the mind. For instance, the mind identifies a thatched hut to be a house in so far as the mind exhausts all the attributes of what makes a house through coherent attribution based on the already existing pool of knowledge, and affirms a thatched hut seen many years after to be a house as the hut meets the qualities of what the mind knows to be a house. In this line of thought, Ezebuilo avers that "in correspondence theory, the truth of a proposition consists not in relation to other propositions but in its relation to the world, its correspondence to reality or to facts."<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the correspondence theory of truth finds the truthfulness or falsity of a statement affirmed or refuted based on the relation of the statement with reality. By extension, the truth of a statement is unraveled in so far as it is amenable to the reality around us. This theory is in line with the Aristotelian dictum, *adequatio rei et intellectus*. The theory has been criticized that it compares ideas with reality; and for the fact that the experience of reality could be subjective, how then is the objectivity of truth attained?

The correspondence and coherence theories have no particular proponents like the pragmatic theory. Nonetheless, the ideas they hold cut across thinkers of all ages, not as correspondence or coherence theories, but lucidly traceable in their philosophical exegeses. For the correspondence theory, the idea is traceable in the views of Aristotle, Rene Descartes, John Locke, Bertrand Russell, William James, G.E. Moore, Donald Davidson, *et cetera*. On the other hand, traces of the coherence theory are found in Baruch Spinoza, G.W.F. Hegel, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, JP Sartre, *et cetera*.

## **PRAGMATISM: AN OVERVIEW**

It has already been established that pragmatism is another perspective to the question of truth. One cannot refute the iconoclastic position of the pragmatic theory of truth in determining the truthfulness of a belief or proposition. These notions however, are somewhat the prerequisites to the exact meaning and veracity of the word pragmatism as succinctly represented by the staunch pragmatists themselves. Hence, it suffices to say here in line with the view of Justus Buchler that "pragmatism is, in itself, no doctrine of metaphysics, no attempt to determine any truth of things. It is merely a method of ascertaining the meanings of hard words and of abstract concepts."<sup>16</sup> It is in this line of thought that William James defines pragmatism as "the doctrine that the whole 'meaning' of a concept expresses itself either in the shape of conduct recommended or of experience to be expected."<sup>17</sup>

This theory was deduced from the pragmatism of the three philosophers exposed above. This theory somehow hinges the coherence and correspondence theories on practicality. In this connection, it affirms truth only when an idea has been given birth to in experience or application. It does not just end there, but it goes on to establish that the truth must be verifiable, workable, practicable, consequential and corroborative, with cash value. In the words of *Ezebuilo*, the “Pragmatist theory stresses also that correspondence with reality is manifested by the belief’s survival of test of experience, and its coherence with other beliefs.”<sup>18</sup> This means that the truth achieved through pragmatic efforts must be able to fit in with beliefs that cohere with it.

### **PRAGMATISM AS A SYNERGY**

The synergic prowess of the pragmatic theory of truth lies in the basic principle of pragmatism - practical consequence - as stated by one of the proponents that “the hypothesis that works is the true one.”<sup>19</sup> Though pragmatism has not been scholarly posited as a synergy of the previous two traditional theories of truth, one could infer the synergic functions using the following statement of *Ezebuilo* that “pragmatism has affinities for coherence and correspondence theories,”<sup>20</sup> as a springboard thus:

**Unification of Science and Metaphysics:** The primary place of pragmatism is in the unification of metaphysics and science. Metaphysics here is likened to coherence because metaphysical concepts lie more in the mind as ideas while science deals more with the matching of ideas with reality. The pristine two theories of truth have things that are dormant both in reality and in the mind. What pragmatism does here is to knit the two theories together in what is seen as the practical consequence. It is on the level of the practical consequence that the two theories meet. Thus, tangibility is given to the thought of man and the identification of the objects of reality. It is in this line of thought that Popper finds reason to retain metaphysical concepts as they could be proven someday and made workable. Hence, “no discovery should be refuted because no scientific theory becomes a theory just as it was discovered and so, all discoveries in form of conjectures could assume a scientific theory if kept and revisited.”<sup>21</sup> This therefore purports the *integration function* of pragmatism to coherence and correspondence theories.

**Bridging Function to Correspondence and Coherence:** Prior to the discovery of the pragmatic movement in the twentieth century, its manifestations had been traceable in the works and activities of human communities but without an organized method and proper technicality. This presupposes that the ideas were as a result of coherent exegeses and the interest of correspondence laid in parallel and dormant; parallelism of ideas and reality. This is evident in the development of the American world as the sole aim of John Dewey and Williams James. Hence, pragmatism was criticized as being vulnerable to the rationalization of American economic ethos.

**Accentuation Function:** The bridging function of pragmatism led to what could be described as the accentuation function, where the aims of coherence and correspondence ideas were materialized. It is in the pragmatic theory of truth that the pristine theories find expression and so, pragmatism could be described as the culminating point of ideas and reality.

**Mediating Function between Language and Reality:** The synergic function of pragmatism lies vividly in the mediating power it exacts on language and reality. Language here is attributed to Being as obtainable in Martin Heidegger<sup>22</sup> while reality here depicts all that is contained in reality. The language is spoken to a Being in the form of an idea in the mind (this

depicts the coherence theory), and the idea becomes reality when the language is spoken to a particular being or what could be called Dasein. This language is communicated silently to the mind of Poets and Artists as poems and arts; and revealed externally to the world as reality correspondently. The overlapping of the idea communicated to a being and the reality depicts the correspondence theory. The function of language here is to unravel the concealed idea which leads to the replication or matching of the idea in reality. Pragmatism comes to play here as a copula insofar as the idea presented can practically be consequential; where applicability, workability and instrumentalism are all obtainable.

### **CRITICISM OF PRAGMATISM AS A DEFAULT TO ITS SYNERGIC PROWESS**

The coherence theory posits the existence of truth if the proposition made has a semblance, or could be fixed in, to the universal pool of knowledge. The correspondence theory, according to some scholars, is *adequatio rei et intellectus*; that is, adequation of the mind to reality. This is to say that for any proposition to be true, it must necessarily be sound. The pragmatic theory of truth seems to influence the other two theories in that truth is exercised only when it is practicable, workable, corroborative, verifiable, consequential and with cash value. This presupposes that any proposition that is not practicable cannot be said to be true or to even possess an iota of truth value; that is to say, it is indeterminate. By extension, when a proposition coheres or corresponds, it must have survived the turbulence or test of experience to have been proved applicable and epistemological (geared towards attaining new knowledge). The practical knowledge of a proposition concretizes or validates the proposition or belief to be true. Any proposition that does not have a positive or negative impact on the society cannot be said to be true.

In any case, as beautiful and strong as the affinity of pragmatism for coherence and correspondence may be, it is not without fault. Such faults include:

**Utility Overemphasized:** The primary aim of pragmatism is geared towards utility. Whatever is not amenable to applicability is not reckoned with in this doctrine. This raises the question, is it every idea one conceives that could be applied immediately? Time frame does not seem to be considered here as whatever is conceived is to be utilized instantly.

**Subjective Relativism:** Another criticism adduced against pragmatism is that it has relativistic tendencies.<sup>23</sup> This relativistic tendencies is clearly seen in the fact that what works in America may not work in Nigeria (as in the case of democracy). This purports a lack of objective standard. This brings to mind the opinion of Kwasi Wiredu that relative opinions form the objective ideas in the long run.<sup>24</sup> So, the pragmatic theory may find perfection when the relativistic role finds expression objectively.

**Reduction of Truth to Instrumental Value:** Pragmatism was presented as an instrument or an *organon* which implements the ideas of the coherence and correspondence theories; the view of truth consisting solely in practicality or utility. Although this appears reasonable, must all that qualifies as truth be amenable to being utilizable? Truth is larger than practicality as it depicts all reality. The idea that pragmatism depicts what could be described as contextual limitations. Amongst other limitations of pragmatism are: **Conflicting Values** (could be seen as misplacing the priorities of the two pristine theories) **and Negation of Epistemic Values** (knowledge does not only consist in workability but also in idea).

Succinctly, the pragmatic theory of truth is evidently applicable almost in every sphere of life. Notably, developments in science and technological inventions seem to justify the views of pragmatism. For pragmatists, a proposition that is necessarily correspondent or coherent is said to be true only when it is sufficiently practicable and verifiable. The application of this theory is not farfetched in that it plays out when one takes an ordinary decision as simple as sleeping. This is because the sleep was thought of, planned, carried out and can be verified. Moreover, it is not without practical consequences. The pragmatic theory supposes that the practical consequence of a belief could either be positive or negative, successful or harmful.

## CONCLUSION

From the supra analysis so far, the paper has exposed the tenets of the coherence and correspondence theories of truth which became subsumed in pragmatism. The idea of pragmatism avows a synergic prowess in the manner of expressing the intents of the two pristine theories in the purview of applicability. This opinion was prioritized in the views of the three main pragmatists Peirce, James and Dewey in determining that what is true about an idea lies in the practicability or workability of such an idea. Even though the pragmatic theory is given much credence in science, it is obtainable almost in all spheres of life. It therefore suffices to say that any idea that is not practicable is quixotic and impoverishing, and cannot be said to be true. Hence, the synergic prowess of pragmatism is not far-fetched as it remains a necessity and a possibility for revealing the intents of the coherence and correspondence theories.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The Etymology of Pragmatism <https://encyclopedia Britannica. pragmatism|philosophy.com> accessed on 10th May, 2024 at 21:10 WAT.
- <sup>2</sup> A.S. Hornby, *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*, 9th ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1204.
- <sup>3</sup> Richard Ormerod, "The History and Idea of Pragmatism," *Journal of the Operational Research Society*, 57, (2006), 898.
- <sup>4</sup> <https://encyclopedia Britannica. pragmatism|philosophy.com> accessed on 10th May, 2024 at 21:50 WAT. <sup>5</sup> William James on Pragmatism <https://www. pragmatism. williamjames-org>. accessed 10th May, 2024 at 22:15 WAT.
- <sup>6</sup> Austin Cline, *What is pragmatism?* <https://www.learnreligions.com> accessed on 9th May, 2024 at 15:30WAT.
- <sup>7</sup> Lawhead, *The Voyage of Discovery: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy*, 466.
- <sup>8</sup> Lawhead, *The Voyage of Discovery: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy*, 467.
- <sup>9</sup> Lawhead, *The Voyage of Discovery: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy*, 468.
- <sup>10</sup> Lawhead, *The Voyage of Discovery: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy*, 472.
- <sup>11</sup> Paul Edwards, ed. *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 5&6 (New York: Macmillan Publishers, 1964), 434.
- <sup>12</sup> Hyginus C. Ezebuilo, *Epistemology at a Glance*, (Awka: IProgressive Press, 2022), 12.
- <sup>13</sup> Noah Lemos, *An Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 66.
- <sup>14</sup> Lemos, *An Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge*, 67.
- <sup>15</sup> Ezebuilo, *Epistemology at a Glance*, 12.
- <sup>16</sup> Charles S. Peirce, *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1955), 271.

- <sup>17</sup> Peirce, *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, 272.
- <sup>18</sup> Ezebuilo, *Epistemology at a Glance*, 13.
- <sup>19</sup> John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1920), 156.
- <sup>20</sup> Ezebuilo, *Epistemology at a Glance*, 13.
- <sup>21</sup> Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Publishers, 1963), 34.
- <sup>22</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings: From Being and Time to the Task of Thinking*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1977), 310.
- <sup>23</sup> Ezebuilo, *Epistemology at a Glance*, 13.
- <sup>24</sup> Kwasi Wiredu, *Philosophy and an African Culture* (C.U.P, 1980), 111. Quoted in Joseph Omoregbe, *Epistemology: A Systematic and Historical Study* (Lagos: Joja Education Research and Publishers Limited, 1998), 47.

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