

# **ABSOLUTENESS OF TRUTH: A CRITICAL SURVEY OF A SELECTED PHILOSOPHICAL POSITIONS**

By

Austin Ntol Inyamigim and Uke Anthony Innocent  
Department of Philosophy  
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka  
na.inyamigim@unizik.edu.ng

## **ABSTRACT**

The question of truth in both philosophy and religion has been an age-long debate, dating back to the classical ancient Greek philosophers like Socrates in his dialogical interface with his students on what truth really is. This paper is a critical attempt to examine the concept of the absolutism of truth, which holds that there is one absolute and universal truth. The Problem this paper seeks to address is the tension between the belief in an absolute truth and the diverse, context-specific interpretations of truth in different cultures and philosophical traditions. To explore this issue, the paper attempts to inquire into the problems posed by the absolutism of truth: What is considered truth? An attempt to answer this question immediately plunges us into grappling with two philosophical positions: psychologism and realism. The paper employs the research methods of philosophical analysis and critical examination to investigate the different philosophical postulations on truth, including its inflexibility and its inability to account for various cultural and contextual understandings of truth. Furthermore, the paper considers the relevance of the absolute nature of truth in philosophy, arguing that while it may be useful in certain contexts, it is not a universally applicable concept. The paper concludes by calling for a more nuanced and context-specific understanding of truth that takes into account the diversity of human experience.

## **Introduction**

For a proper understanding of this thesis, attempts must be made to know the problems posed by it; namely—what is considered true? An attempt to answer this question immediately plunges us into grappling with two positions: psychologism and realism. The absolutism of truth refers to the belief that there is one universal and unchanging truth that exists independently of individual perceptions and contexts. This notion challenges us to consider whether such an absolute truth can truly encompass the diverse experiences and interpretations that shape our understanding of reality.

Psychologism is of the opinion that material truths are not absolute but a matter of general or conventional acceptance<sup>1</sup>. To this effect, opponents to this view like Erdmund, Karl Popper, Gottlieb, Godel Rudolf etc opine that truth is that which comes out of a man, that is an acceptance of a thing.

Realist on the other hand hold that mathematical truths are out there, independent of the mind. Accordingly then, truth is that based on individual judgment or as it stands out there. In this view, we we have the positivists like August Comte, Earnest March, Richard Avenarius, Otto

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<sup>1</sup> Ijeoma C., Unpublished Lecture notes in The Philosophy of Mathematics " ( University of Calabar, 1999). P.8.

Nurraat and others.

The Question then becomes, can the acceptance of mathematical truths or what is accepted as true be justified on the platform of realism or psychologism?

From the above, we can rightly say that though both views are plausible in their capacity as they sound, non represents the perfect answer, rather psychologism brings us nearer to untieing of the difficult knot.

### **The Question about Truth**

The word or concept "truth" is often controversial. Little wonder then that even Pilate who is not divine when faced with the question of truth by Jesus asked logically - "what is truth?"<sup>2</sup>. Other questions such as what sort of thing(s) is truth? When do we say a thing is true? etc border the human intellect. Epistemologically the question of the certitude of knowledge (truth) generated a lot of diverse opinions and schools such as skepticism, rationalism, empiricism, sophisicism and so on.

Truth has been called a transcendental attribute, being placed thereby in the same category as being and goodness- or rather "these attributes have been said to be alike in that they transcend all categories"<sup>3</sup>. Truths have been identified with most various entities such as particular inscriptions; the concrete mental entities such as particular thoughts or ideas; abstract entities such other than classes related by the mysterious relation which has been called propositions.

In this light, Arthur Prior argues that truth could be reached at by consequences, that is through logic. This according to Cohen expresses a logical truth<sup>4</sup>. For him therefore to understand a thing, we must first understand a relation between that thing and a certain class of expression. Thus he states that the variable letters --- p,q, r etc are connected in logic to sentences in a way similar to that which x, y, and z are connected in algebra to numerals.

### **The Nature of Mathematical truth**

Mathematical truths by way of clarification refers to evidences obtained from sentencing or symbolic deduction or induction by way of reasoning<sup>5</sup>. On the other hand there have been diversed opinions. In this light, some arguments that mathematical truths could either be pragmatismal, empirical, intuitive or scientific. It is in the light of the complexities Involved in formulating a definition or explanation of the nature of mathematical truth that so little has been written by philosophers and mathematicians concerning this topic. These complexities and disagreements shall therefore be our subject of concern and clearly expounded in our subsequent topics.

### **Truth as conventional or Objective**

Psychologism:

According to the World Book Encyclopedia, psychologism stems from the psychological branch of human behaviour concerning the knowledge sourced from the intellect or mind.

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<sup>2</sup> Williams C.J. F. "What is Truth?", ( London: Cambridge University Press, 1976) P.2

<sup>3</sup> Williams, Loc.cit, P.5

<sup>4</sup> The World Book Encyclopedia, Vol.23 (U.S.A. Field Enterorises Educational Corporation, 1976), P. 1114

<sup>5</sup> The World Book Encyclopedia, Loc. Cit. P. 1119

Accordingly then, every knowledge of man is conditioned by the society<sup>6</sup>

The basis of this research stems from the postulation by psychologism that " To be true is to be accepted". This can be found in the statement that there is no absolute truth in Mathematics. Consequently, the psychologists in this camp argue that every activity of man is conditioned by the society. Though this position is erroneous to other schools of thought especially, the realist who advanced a number of theories to back up their arguments. In psychologism, there have been three major arguments advanced in favour of the general acceptance of the truth of Mathematics.

#### If--Thenism

Another theory of truth under the conventionalists camp is If--Thenism. This camp advanced a measure referred to as commutative laws of addition and multiplication. These laws may be expressed as the following conditional statement according to Nagel-- " if 'a' and 'b' are real numbers, then  $(a+b)= b+a$ <sup>7</sup>. According to the If--Thenists, this statement could be true even if there are no real number.

Advocates of this theory are C.I. Lewis, E. Nagel, Gotliab Dale, etc. Close to this theory is the coherence theory of truth which states that a thing is true if and only if it agrees or is logically consistent with other realities, statements or theories of a system. Each statement or theory is related to every other statement or theory by implication. This theory has been applauded for its import in the evaluation of the truth content of statements or ideas as they confront us. A few criticisms have been raised against this two views.

Against psychologism, the realists like Godel Hempel, Carrap, A.J. Ayer etc hold that " numbers are not mental and hence do not exist as part of the human mind<sup>7</sup>. For to hold that numbers exist in many minds according to Ayer would imply that " they are many zeros, many ones, etc. This is not only surprising, but also contradicts the axioms of real numbers which imply that zero , one, etc are unique<sup>8</sup>

Again if we believe that truth is general then, it means therefore that it exist in many minds. Therefore symbols if we go by this assertion are present in different sets of objects at the same time.

Against coherent theory, critics argue that "it is possible to have a statement or theory that is consistent with one system, but inconsistent with another"<sup>9</sup>, argues A.F. Uduigwomen. On another note, one can be forced to argue against the coherentists that it is a statement with a system of judgement, yet not applicable to the real world.

#### Conventionalism

The conventionlaists hold the view that on the theory of logical truth, certain statements of logic are true only because there exist certain logical forms, and these statements are instances of those forms<sup>10</sup>. Philosophers like Gotlieb D., C I. Lewis, Nagel and even analytic philosophers like Ayer, Hempel etc hold this view because they thought that a conventionalist theory would enable them have their logical forms without having queer entities. These

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<sup>6</sup> Lehman H. " Introduction To Philosophy of Mathematics" (Winconsin: PrincetonUniversityPress, 1949). P.12-13

<sup>7</sup> Ayer A.J. and Hempel (etd), "Language, Truth and Logic " ( New York: Dover Publications, 1946), P.306.

<sup>8</sup> Ayer and Hempel, Loc. Cit. P.309.

<sup>9</sup> Uduigwomen A.F., " History and Philosophy of Science" (Aba: AAU Industries Publishing, 1998), P. 141.

<sup>10</sup> Lehman H., 'Introduction To Philosophy of Mathematics" , P.111

philosophers might claim that "truths of logic are instances of sentences which have been affirmed as true by social fiat or convention"<sup>11</sup>

By way of criticism, it is argued that if that theory is correct, let us be sure that an infinite number (at least potentially infinite) of logical truths have been adopted. Even if we assume that conventions have been adopted at the rate of one per second ever since the appearance of man on the face of the earth, H. Lehmann argues, we would not have as many conventions as there are truths of logic. This brings us close to Bethrand Russels theory expressed in his book *Principles of Mathematics*<sup>12</sup>

Summarily put, according to Sybil Wolfram, for the conventionalists, " truths may be divided into necessarily true and contingent. Again, all truths which are necessary are so because of the meaning of the words that express them".<sup>13</sup>

#### Intuitionlalism

An intuitionist theory of meaning aims at the certitude of truth through the grasp of the intellect. These mathematical truths according to this psychological school could be learned. According to Dummett, this theory is dual in nature, namely-- truth conditions and assertibility condition. For him then, the strongest argument for intuitionism comes from " the insistence that the general form of explanation of meaning, and hence of the logical operations in particular is a statement not of the truth conditions, but of the assertibility--conditions."<sup>14</sup> By this, he intends to show that the intuitionists go searching for the conditions to ascertain truth.

This theory is constructive or logical so that Dummett says that " the most powerful argument in favour of intuitionism is a constructive theory which insist that there is no other means by which we can give meaning to mathematical expressions."<sup>13</sup> Hence for the intuitionists, there is no means by which we could derive a notion of truth and falsity for mathematical statements independent of our means for recognising their truth--value.

Dummett's argument seems to be that an assertibility--condition theory of meaning like that argued by Price Huw in " Facts and Functions of Truths" is preferable to a truth-condition theory. Dummett seems to further state that such a theory of meaning has as consequence, an intuitionist view of Mathematical truth.

As a critic against intuitionism, it is assumed that since a truth--condition theory cannot be held with a red theory of truth, it must be supported by a correesponce theory, a theory that is according to which a statement is true only if there is something in virtue of which it is true. However, one can also argue that this realist assumption is false for there are many statements such that there is nothing in virtue of which either they or their negations are true.

Hempel, an analytic philosopher explains against psychologism by intuition that there is a distinction in mathematical truth between analytic and synthetic truths as thus: " analytic truths are true simply by virtue of definitions or of similar stipulations which determines the meaning of the key terms involved"<sup>15</sup>

According to this view, Hempel considers the arithmetical truth that  $3+2 = 5$ . The terms contained in the statements of this truth are 3, 2, +, = and 5. According to the view in question, these terms have meanings attached to them only explanation. Example, 2 has truth value only by the definition agreed by mathematicians. Hence according to Hempel, we can only tell that

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<sup>11</sup> Wittgenstein L., " Meaning and Necessity: A Study in Semantics and Modal Logic"( Chicago: Chicago Press, 1949), P.139

<sup>12</sup> Wolf S. " Philosophica Logica; An Introduction ",( London: Routleg Inc., 1976), P.146

<sup>13</sup> Lehman H., Op. Cit. P.19

<sup>14</sup> Lehman H., Loc Cit.

<sup>15</sup> Encyclopedia Britanica, Vol. 13; ( New York: Encyclopedia Britanica Inc., 1971), P.431

$3+2=5$  is true simply by considering the meaning attached to the signs that it contains, which makes no sense.

Furthermore, A.J. Ayer and Hempel were saying that what we have seen as mathematical propositions have no ontological import. That is even though statements such as  $3+2=5$  are true, this does not mean that anything exist as such.

Against this criticism by realists, we can rightly observe that the view that arithmetical and other mathematical truths are true because of the definitions of the terms in the statement expressing them may appear plausible if one considers simple truths such as  $3+2=5$ , because it may be argued that the sign "3" is an abbreviation or representation for some mark such as "11" and that "2" is an abbreviation of "11".

Carnap Rudolf in his work *Foundation Of Logic And Mathematics* represented this position more clearly when he held that the idea that Mathematical truths are statements which are true in virtue of the meanings if their terms are understood in two ways; firstly, that " Mathematical truths are statements whose truth is determined solely by rules which relate to the kinds of signs occurring in the statement and their serial order. Secondly, relations between signs, objects and properties". Others who hold similar views are Putnam and Qu weine.

Against this view, we should say that mathematicians such as Leibniz, Newton, Descartes, Archimedes etc did not know such truths as  $2+3=5$ , since Peano or even Frege and Russel hadn't yet given the definitions of the required terms. With Godel, we come to the end of intuitionism. His has also been called "epistemo-platonism". It is one in which mathematical knowledge is non-empirical. The failure of this view is the inability to provide a reasonable account of any causal relationship which would explain the occurrence in the individual's mind.

Postulationism

Proponents in this school are Russel, Poincarè and others. They avoid the mistakes of the conventionalists by arguing against the statement such as the axiom of real number theory. They hold rather that pure mathematics consists in deducing by purely logical inferences; the consequences of freely chosen postulates. Russel claimed that with reference to Euclides "What Pure mathematics asserts is that the Euclidean propositions follow from the Euclidean axioms"<sup>15</sup>.

Postulationism may also be expressed as the claim that the axioms of a Mathematical theory constitutes a set of specifications which defines a structure that the mathematician wishes to study, whether there is any object in such structure, it is alleged is of no concern to the mathematician.

The postulationists by calling the axioms definitions wishes to draw attention to a contrast between statements of definition and other declarative statements which are accepted as true. Poincarè claimed (with respect to geometry) that axioms are definitions in disguise.

Finally, according to Quine while postulationism makes what sounds like an interesting claim, namely that truths of Mathematics are infact truths of logic, all that postulationism really amounts to is redefining of the scope of the term mathematical truths.

## **Truth as Objective**

Realism

According to the Encyclopedia Britanica, "realism is perception which is a realist position stating that knowledge or truth about the world comes from the common-sense belief that there is an external world, populated by real objects, both natural and artificial, e.g horses, trees, rocks, man etc."<sup>16</sup> Accordingly realists hold with regard to mathematical truths that they (mathematical truths) are just out there independent of the mind.

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<sup>16</sup> Williams C.J.F. Op. Cit. P.17

In this side of the divide thus, we shall briefly consider some realists theories and their positions. We shall therefore consider the positivists, verificationists, correspondence camp, and of course the pragmatics who dominate this view. For these groups, what is considered as truth is out there objectively, thus we obtain it either by verifying or experimenting on it.

Correspondence Theory:

Aristotle's dictum that " To say of what is, that it is and of what is not that it is not"<sup>17</sup> has been regarded as the first statement of correspondence theory of truth. There may be some justification for this assertion.

For G. E. Moore, " when a belief is true, that which is believed is a fact and when a belief is false , that which is believed is not a fact"<sup>18</sup>. Taski on his part considers truth as a property of sentences and involves a relationship between a sentence and reality.

The difficulties that may arise out of this position is as indicated by C J. Williams which may be that correspondists have indirectly introduced rationalism. He argues that the concept of truth that involves the concept of correspondence seems to involve the view that truth is rational, because to correspond is to fit or match. Thus to say that something corresponds to what is, means it fits. Fitting and corresponding seem to be a matter of logical relations.

Verificationism:

This position is associated with the logical positivists of the Vienna circle. This is the position according to which " scientific truth is the only kind of factual knowledge and all traditional metaphysical doctrines are to be rejected as meaningless"<sup>19</sup>

According to the principle of verifiability, a statement is true or meaningful if it can be verified in ones present experience. They classed statements into formal and empirical statements. Proponents of this view include Rudolf Carnap, Otto Nurat, Hans Reichenback, Kunt Godel. These camp hold a rigorous scientific attitude towards knowledge or truth.

Some of the verificationists hold that declarative sentences do not have meaning. The second claim by these advocates is that analytic positions have no factual imports. According to A. J. Ayer and Hepel Lehman, analytic propositions provide no information about any matter of facts, that is, they are entirely devoid of factual contents. By this they intend to say that mathematical propositions are general truths or convention because they are not conformable or verifiable by reference to sensory observations. For example, we do not know such propositions such as  $3+2=5$  because of anything we have observed. Such statements or propositions are neither confirmable nor refutable by reference to observable phenomenon.

Criticisms of Both Verificationism and Correspondence

The main problem with verificationism is that it fails to take cognizance of the fact that the experience of one person cannot be the same as those of another. For instance, consider the concept of "truth" in different cultural contexts. In many African communities, truth may be closely tied to communal consensus and storytelling, where shared experiences shape understanding. This is typically practised among the Bakor speaking community in Northern Cross River of Nigeria in the adjudication of Justice where two or three persons are with the same evidence are called to testify to the veracity of the ownership of a portion of land that is in dispute. In contrast, in more individualistic cultures, truth might be defined by personal experience and empirical evidence.

Furthermore, against the correspondists, we argue according to Dummett that if the realist is to

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<sup>17</sup> Uduigwomen A.F. Op. Cit. P.140.

<sup>18</sup> Encyclopedia Britanica, Vol. 14; ( New York: Encyclopedia Britanica Inc., 1971), P.247

<sup>19</sup> Encyclopedia Britanica., Op. Cit., P. 285

maintain that " a mathematical statement of the form  $(fx) = fx$  is either true or false, then since he must concede that one might be unable either to produce a number which is "F" or to prove that there can be no such number, he must claim that there exists a mathematical relief independent of human knowledge of it, in virtue of which  $(fx)$  is either true or false".<sup>20</sup>

### **Pragmatism**

This is of the view that what works is what is true. According to Peirce, "truth is the consequence of the experimental method which is agreed upon by scientific community"<sup>21</sup>. For William James, truth is determined by consequences<sup>22</sup>. Thus, truth what happens to an idea when it is verified or warranted.

### **Criticisms**

The objections, though few, raised against Pragmatism stems from the view that a statement or theory is true if its empirical consequences meet our expectations. The question one may ask at this point is -- whose expectation? Is it the individual or the society? This introduces subjectivity into the process of testing objective truth. A corollary objection to the first objection is that the attempt to verify truth has to await its consequences. This tends to confuse the truth with good.

### **Critical Evaluation and Conclusion.**

#### **Truth Cannot Be Substantial:**

Two arguments there are that truth cannot be Substantial whether as correspondence or as psychological. These two arguments generalise the skeptical challenge. We have the Marker Theorists and non- factualists who both claim to find a division in language between fact-stating and non- facts stating uses.

A substantial theory of truth would permit a particular account of this distinction. It would allow the theorists to say that the fact-stating uses one distinctive position in standing in a certain (yet to be specified) relationship to the properties of truth and falsity. Given such a proposal, the skeptics challenge the theorists idea for assigning any given utterance to one of the division of truth or the other.

Furthermore, among other things, a substantial theory of truth is supposed to provide an analytically and synthetically grounded explanation of truth. But it seems that there can be no evidence for such a theory, other than the very linguistic phenomena of psychologism and the experimental facts of realism. "This seems to be the most common predicament of scientific theory"<sup>23</sup>

#### **Recommendations:**

I would want to reason that it should be that the grounds for the acceptance of a theory should consist simply in the fact that it offers the best available explanation of a range of phenomenon devoid of uncertainties.

Furthmore, it is my opinion that these radical interpreters and their theorems of truth do not

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<sup>20</sup>Dummett M., " The Logical Basis of Metaphysics", ( Havard: Havard University Press, 1991), P.101.

<sup>21</sup>Pierce C.S, "corrected papers of Charles Sanders P. (ed), (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1935), p. 565.

<sup>22</sup>James W., "Pragmatism: A New Name for some Old Ways of Thinking, (Harvard University Press, 1975) p. 106

have to mention truth at all. In that light, if they mentioned, then it is only lopsided. Thus the resolution of these schools of what is taken as truth, turns out a distinction between meaning and use.

I dare to inquire finally here that because of all the problems involved, is it rational, conventional or practicable if I may ask? It is worthwhile to categorically state here that truth is therefore either subjective or conventional or conditional in various concepts involved?. Mathematically  $2+2=4$  is true, that is for the mathematician. Truth as a concept is universal, but as argued here is tainable only as relational which is stand point of this research.

For I cannot even talk about truth without relations, that is contextual or conventional or generally perceived and accepted.

### **Conclusion**

Both views namely psychologism and realism are very convincing in their presentation. For A.J.Ayer, Hempel, Pierce, to reject mathematical truths as mere definitions and thus nonsensical is quite untenable. Mathematical truths like psychologism purports are not absolute but a matter of general acceptance or convention because if we take for instance the number zero which was not there initially, but was agreed upon subsequently in Mathematics. For every knowledge we possess is taught to us as accepted upon by a general consensus. But what is questionable is whether so far we can have a genuine theory. The relation of correspondence is at least as problematic as the concept of truth.

For the simple thing we can say of truth is that things are as they are which is itself something whose meaning can be elucidated with the help of quantification, identity, truth functions and sentential variables. Thus it is only expedient to conclude here that what is, is true because it is in its nature just there untampered with by language or experience.

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