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Kyle Novak  
info@ubiquitypress.com

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### Abstract

Correspondence theories of truth claim that truth involves a relationship between ideas in the mind and facts in the world, but because minds are viewed as being disconnected from the world, there is no way to determine whether beliefs are true or false under the correspondence view. For truth to be a meaningful concept, a theory about it must conceive of it in a way that is meaningful for humans. By looking at Heidegger's ideas about phenomenology and humans as Dasein I argue for a framework that does not rest on a Cartesian subject/object dualism, and instead grounds concepts, like truth, in experience. I then turn to William James' pragmatic theory of truth as "what works" and argue that it is applicable for Dasein and provides a meaningful conception of truth.

# An Argument for a Phenomenological Pragmatic Conception of Truth

**Kyle Novak**  
*University of North Dakota*

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## Abstract

Correspondence theories of truth claim that truth involves a relationship between ideas in the mind and facts in the world, but because minds are viewed as being disconnected from the world, there is no way to determine whether beliefs are true or false under the correspondence view. For truth to be a meaningful concept, a theory about it must conceive of it in a way that is meaningful for humans. By looking at Heidegger's ideas about phenomenology and humans as Dasein I argue for a framework that does not rest on a Cartesian subject/object dualism, and instead grounds concepts, like truth, in experience. I then turn to William James' pragmatic theory of truth as "what works" and argue that it is applicable for Dasein and provides a meaningful conception of truth.

In *Experimental Phenomenology*, Don Ihde makes the observation that pragmatism and phenomenology are both "philosophies of *experience*" (Ihde 115). Both reject Cartesianism and Platonic questions about existence (Ihde 117) and are instead concerned with human experience in the world. A difference that he observes between the two is that pragmatism is oriented towards action (Ihde 117), while phenomenology is concerned with description (Ihde 118). Rather than seeing this difference as grounds for separating phenomenology from pragmatism, Ihde suggests that a complementary "*postphenomenology*" is possible (Ihde 118). Following Ihde, I contend that while phenomenology provides a basis for philosophical inquiry, concepts which have a practical value, such as truth, are best understood with the application of a pragmatic lens.

To make my contention I will look at truth in particular and argue that it is a concept that must be approached phenomenologically and should be conceived in pragmatic terms. To do this, I will first critique Bertrand Russell's portrayal of the correspondence view of truth as resting on an untenable Cartesian dualism. Then I will look at Martin

Heidegger's conception of the phenomenological method as providing grounds for human philosophical inquiry, and at his views on human understanding being an interpretation of our projects in the world. Following this, I will argue that the pragmatic notion of truth, as articulated by William James, provides a meaningful conception of truth for humans in the world.

Similar to common sense notions is the correspondence theory of truth. In his defense of correspondence, Bertrand Russell lists three conditions that must be met by a theory of truth. First, he says that any theory must also account for what is meant by falsehood. If truth is to be a meaningful term, a theory about it needs to admit that not everything can be true. Whatever "truth" is, its opposite must be falsehood (Russell 277). Second, he says that "truth and falsehood are properties of beliefs and statements" (Russell 278). He does this to differentiate truth from "fact". Facts apply to extant material things, but truth applies to the mind. A fact just is. There can be no false facts, but the beliefs held by a mind can be either true or false. His third condition involves the relationship between the beliefs and facts. Facts are in the world and beliefs are about things in the world (Russell 278).

The three conditions lead Russell to propose that "truth consists in some form of correspondence between belief and fact" (Russell 278). A belief is true when the image or sense a mind has about a fact is the same as the fact in the world; when the two differ the belief is false. There is a problem here which Russell acknowledges. He says that "if truth consists in a correspondence of thought with something outside of thought, thought can never know when truth has been attained" (Russell 278). For Russell, this means that correspondence correctly explains what truth is, but it is ultimately not possible to test whether a belief is true or false.

Russell's account of truth as correspondence implies a Cartesian duality which makes truth an unusable concept. As evidenced by his distinction of material facts and mental beliefs, his theory rests on the assumption that there is an objective world external to the subjective mind. The mind might have a belief about the world that reflects how the world actually is, in which case the belief is true, but because the two are detached, the subjective mind can never be sure that the belief actually reflects the world, so it is not possible for the mind to ever know if its beliefs are true or false. As long as truth is conceived in such a way, the best that can be said about any proposition or belief is: "It might be true, and it might not, we don't know."

"Truth" which is unusable is especially problematic given that truth is a word which has practical value, in that our lives are greatly affected by what we see as true or false. This is seen in all sorts of cases, from everyday activity to matters of national importance. If I believe it is true that a certain film is being shown at a local theater, then I may attempt to go see the film. Conversely, if policy makers believe that theories

about anthropogenic climate change are false, then they are unlikely to take any measures against climate change.

A theory of truth can account for the practical importance given to the word when it is recognized that the Cartesian assumption is unnecessary and untenable. The subjective/objective dichotomy rests on the maxim that nothing can be known outside of consciousness. However, it goes on to posit the existence of a world which is inaccessible to consciousness. Given the first premise, the second is unjustifiable. It is still possible for the external world to exist, but since it is by definition unknowable, humans can make no justifiable statements about it. A claim about truth, or anything else for that matter, must be based on what can be experienced. Phenomenology begins with experience, and, by avoiding Cartesian dualism, it can be used to define truth in a meaningful and usable way.

Heideggerian phenomenology looks at human experience of the world and sees the ways in which we can talk about the world as being based on those experiences. Heidegger rejects the notion that we can talk about something which exists, but which is detached from experience. Rather than viewing phenomenology as a school of thought, Heidegger first identifies phenomenology as a “*methodological conception*” (Heidegger 278). That is, phenomenology tells us *how* to approach a given question.

To get at what it is to do phenomenology, Heidegger breaks the word down into its morphemes “phenomenon” and “logos” (Heidegger 279). Phenomenon is related to “light.” Things become revealed when they are lit, likewise, a phenomenon is “*that which shows itself in itself, the manifest*” (Heidegger 279). Phenomena are what reveal themselves to us or could reveal themselves to us. However, the first thing to consider is not *what* is being revealed, but *how* it is being revealed. After revealing itself in a certain way (how), an object is determined to resemble something (what) (Heidegger 279). However, what it is seen to resemble is not what it really is (we cannot say what it really is, only what it “seems” like). This second thing (the what or seeming like), Heidegger calls “semblance”, and he distinguishes it from phenomenon (Heidegger 280). For this reason, phenomenology leaves open the question of what something is and refers to how something is revealing (or can reveal) itself.

Relating to the term “logos”, Heidegger translates it as “discourse” (Heidegger 282). Like light again, discourse “lets something be seen” (Heidegger 282). Discourse is speaking (Heidegger 283) which brings to light more information, more concepts, and more ways of seeing things. When one speaks about something, there is the speaker, the act of speaking (the Greek term Heidegger uses is *legein*), and the thing spoken about (*legomenon*). The *legomenon* is the substrate of the discourse (i.e. the something which reveals itself before it is spoken about), and the speaker, the self, stands in relation to the *legomenon*. Thus, logos as discourse is conceived as a relationship.

Combining the phenomenon which reveals itself and the discourse about the phenomenon yields “phenomenology.” The purpose of phenomenology is “to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself” (Heidegger 284). Thus, doing phenomenology means describing (i.e. bringing into consciousness through discourse) how things reveal themselves to us (i.e. how phenomena is encountered).

Phenomenological method and Heideggerian terminology provide a new vocabulary and framework for approaching the topic of truth. Unlike in Russell, there is no object which stands in relation to the subject, but which is ultimately admitted to be unknowable and inaccessible to the subject. A relationship still exists, but it is between the speaker and the *legomenon*; and the *legomenon* is known and accessible to the speaker because it has revealed itself to the speaker.

Insofar as speaking is phenomenological, it would presently seem that discourse about any topic, truth or otherwise, would have to be limited to descriptions about phenomena. However, Heidegger sees phenomenology as also being interpretive. In order to elucidate the interpretive aspect of phenomenology, I will discuss Heidegger’s conception of human Being-in-the-world. The move from description of phenomena to interpretation of phenomena by humans will provide the means and context for looking at James’ pragmatic theory of truth.

Phenomenology has been defined as speaking about phenomena; but it has not yet been made clear how phenomena reveal themselves, or to whom they reveal themselves. It is humans in “the world” who are encountering phenomena and doing phenomenology. Heidegger uses the term “Dasein” to describe human existence, or “Being-in-the-world”. “The world” here refers to where Dasein lives (Heidegger 289). Living in the world means having “dealings *in* the world and *with* entities within-the-world” (Heidegger 291). Entities are the various naturally occurring, human made, and living “things” that we encounter (Heidegger 289). Things are not encountered from a disinterested theoretical standpoint. Living as having dealings means that things are always encountered with some purpose in mind, or some concern. Heidegger’s example is that a door handle is not just encountered as something simply there, but as a means for opening a door in order to, say, meet someone. His term for these things we encounter that concern us is “equipment” (Heidegger 292).

Equipment reveals itself to us in a variety of ways. As equipment, it is “ready-to-hand”, which means that rather than being thought about and understood theoretically, it is just used. Heidegger’s example is that a hammer only shows itself as a hammer when it is used for hammering. When equipment is being used properly it “withdraws” from our concern (Heidegger 293). For example, a hammer that is hammering is being used to drive a nail, which could be one step in building a house. In that case the concern is with creating living space, and not with the hammer. All projects are like the example

above in that the equipment employed is in a relational “arrangement” (Heidegger 293). A hammer is only a hammer in relation to a nail, or a pen is only a pen when there is a surface to write on. The relationship can be seen further by considering the raw materials and manufacturing equipment that goes into things like hammers and pens. However, considering equipment in theoretical ways, such as how it is arranged, is not prior to our practical encounter with it. The default way of encountering things is ready-to-hand. Neutrally encountering them in a way that they can be theorized about without concern, or to use Heidegger’s term, encountering them as “present-at-hand” (Heidegger 295), takes place afterward.

In order to encounter entities as present-at-hand, there must be some disturbance in their readiness-to-hand. There are three ways which equipment becomes unusable, or un-ready-to-hand. One way is for it to become “conspicuous” (Heidegger 296). As I’m typing, my concern is with writing this paper, and my keyboard is ready-to-hand for doing so, but if the keyboard were to break, then it would become present-at-hand. It would no longer be equipment for writing, it would just be there, and through this conspicuous being there I would become aware of it as just being there, whereas before it had been withdrawn in its being there for writing. Similarly, if the keyboard had been missing from the start, then I would have been aware of its absence, and all the other equipment that I do have access to would have become “obtrusive”, meaning that even though it is still usable, it is present-at-hand in that it is unusable for my purposes (Heidegger 296). Finally, there can be “obstinacy” (Heidegger 297), an example of which would be if the keyboard were covered and the cover had to be moved before the keyboard could be used. In this case my attention would be toward the keyboard, but it would be temporarily made present-at-hand by the necessity of first moving the cover. The presence-at-hand in the three instances mentioned would not last long and concern would never disappear entirely. Readiness-to-hand would reappear as soon as I attempted to repair, uncover, or find a new keyboard. However, the disturbance in the original readiness-to-hand and emergence of the presence-at-hand marks the arrival of the possibility for encountering things neutrally and for thinking about the projects which the things are tied up in (Heidegger 297). All this is to say that our orientation in the world is through our projects, and phenomena reveal themselves to us in different ways depending on which projects we are engaged in. Therefore, phenomena is interpreted in a particular way, but the possibility for reinterpretation is present in the present-at-hand.

The interpreted way in which things are encountered and reencountered means that “phenomenology of Dasein...is a hermeneutic” (Heidegger 286). The hermeneutic characteristic of phenomenology allows two things to be made explicit. First, what is being revealed is also hidden (Heidegger 284-285). Phenomena as ready-to-hand hides its presence-at-hand. Seeing a hammer as a thing for hammering conceals the hammer as a thing which just is wooden, metallic, etc. This hiddenness leads Heidegger to say that: “Higher than actuality stands *possibility*. We can understand phenomenology only

by seizing upon it as a possibility” (Heidegger 287). When phenomena reveal themselves they do so through an interpretation. The ever present possibility of presence-at-hand means that a reinterpretation is always possible and phenomenology must recognize this.

Heideggerian phenomenology grounds philosophical discourse in the context of how experiences are interpreted. Conceiving of humans as Dasein reveals the close link between phenomenology and pragmatic experience. Our interpretation and description of phenomena is based on our being as Being-in-the world. Because humans always have some concern with the world, truth must be conceived of and encountered in a way that it relates to our projects in the world.

In *Pragmatism*, William James gives an account of truth which is grounded in pragmatic experience and is not concerned with the relationship between belief and an unknowable objective reality. Considering the correspondence view, James initially says that truth as commonly conceived “is a property of certain of our ideas. It means their ‘agreement’...with ‘reality’” (James 291). The problem with this first comes about when we consider the term “agreement”.

Agreement is popularly understood as “copy”, i.e. an idea about something agrees with it, when the idea is a mental copy of the object (James 291). James says to imagine a mechanical clock. The image of the face of the clock is probably close to a copy, but unless you’re a clockmaker, the interior of the clock is largely hidden from your understanding. How is it possible to think about a clock or anything else when parts of it remain hidden?

The pragmatist approaches this question by asking:

Grant an idea or belief to be true...what concrete difference will its being true make in anyone’s actual life? How will the truth be realized? What experiences will be different from those which would obtain if the belief were false? What, in short, is the truth’s cash-value in experiential terms? (James 292)

Continuing with the clock example, even if I do not know the inner workings of it, I can still identify or misidentify “x” as “clock” if I use the pragmatic method. It is easy to imagine the consequences of someone correctly vs. incorrectly identifying something as a clock. If someone correctly believes that “x” is “a clock” the individual will be able to go to the right place for the right amount of time. If the belief is false, then any number of things (e.g. interactions with others or the position of celestial bodies) will conflict with the original belief.

Considering the pragmatic questions raised above, James says the pragmatist’s answer to them is: “*True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate, and*



verify. *False ideas are those that we cannot*” (James 292). James explains the concepts of verification and validation by saying that ideas are verified when they agree with other ideas and experiences (James 292). By answering the questions in this way, pragmatism conceives of truth in terms wholly different than those given by the correspondence theory. Truth and the means for determining truth are not wholly separate. For the pragmatist, truth is only a relevant concept insofar as it is determinable and workable.

Use and truth are directly linked for James. He says that something “is useful because it is true” or “it is true because it is useful” (James 293). Indirect practical verification through use is by and large the most common form of truth making, but a more direct method of verification always underlies it (James 294). We don’t have to study the inner workings of every clock we see to verify that it is a clock; so long as we are able to *use* it to check the time of day with “no frustration or contradiction”, then we have a practical verification that it is a clock. The key part of practical verification is “use”; when we use something, we’re experiencing it in such a way that it serves some function (James 293). Often the underlying direct verification is done by another. For an entity to truly become a clock, somebody had to get the necessary parts, assemble them in the right order, and test that they kept time the same as other already known clocks.

Truth as use seems like a suitable meaning of truth for Being-in-the-world. Pragmatic truth is only an applicable concept when it has to do with the world and our understanding of it. An interpretation of an idea as being true or false depends on how the idea stands in relation to our interpretation of the world. If the idea coheres to our understanding of the world, then it is true for us, if not, then it is false. This does not mean that truth is purely relative and anything goes. Because the world is understood through our concern with projects, ideas and their implication must further those projects. Coherence breaks down when unreadiness-to-hand presents itself, and theorizing can provide the possibility for reinterpretation of the world.

The possibility for change means that temporality is part of the process for determining an idea’s truth. Ideas are not inherently true; instead “truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events” (James 292). Truth applies to the original idea, but truth only becomes a property of the idea after verification. Because the world is always revealing new parts of itself and there is always the possibility for something new to be seen, our conception of what is true should always open to revision and should never be held as an absolute.

James’ and Heidegger’s views on verification and readiness-to-hand lend themselves to one another. Similar to the way in which concern for equipment withdraws when it is ready-to-hand, verification is usually pragmatic and the deeper verification is only implicit. For a clock to reveal itself, it had to be made, but recognizing it as a clock

does not require knowledge about clock-making. If a thing is used to check the time, then it is implicitly recognized as a clock, although the concern is toward the time and not the clock. Likewise, “frustration or contradiction” in James and un-readiness-to-hand in Heidegger both serve as the mechanism by which some revision or theorizing arises. Beliefs about, and encounters with, the world are true when they enable us to continue our projects, and a disruption in our projects can produce reflection which reveals something to be false, thereby creating the possibility for a more useful understanding of what is true. For example, the belief in circular planetary orbits was supported by centuries of observation, but advents in optical technology made the circular models inadequate. This led Kepler to devise a model of planetary motion using elliptical orbits. Kepler’s model proved to be more useful in astronomy, which made it true, and the old models being incoherent with the new, became false.

Phenomenology lets us describe the way things reveal themselves to us. Seeing phenomena in the context of Being-in-the-world both grounds and limits that which can be said. The grounding is in the experience of the world and the world is the limit. Humans live in the world and are concerned with it, which means that humans are always interpreting the world and are oriented in it a certain way. Given projects and the necessity of interpretation, viewing something as true must take those things into consideration. Moving from descriptive phenomenology to an explicitly pragmatic outlook preserves experience and works in the context of our orientation in the world. This combination of phenomenology and pragmatism can be seen as a postphenomenology, which is capable of producing a usable conception of truth for humans.

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