

Truth, correspondence theory of

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Article Summary

The correspondence theory in its simplest form says that truth is a connection to reality. To be true is to accurately describe—in other words, match, picture, depict, express, conform to, agree with, or correspond to—the real world or parts of it. For example, the proposition that a cat is on a mat is *true* if a real cat is on a real mat. Otherwise, that proposition fails to be true. In general, the truth of a proposition is sensitive to how real things are. In short, truth connects to reality.

There are different ways to articulate the connection between true things and the reality they describe. Some theories, for example, treat the connection as a structural relation that ties constituents of a true thing to constituents of the world. Other theories treat the connection as a non-structural correlation between true things and the world. This difference between structural and correlation theories depend on one's theories of three components: true things, real things described by the true things, and the correspondence between truth things and real things. All versions of the correspondence theory arise from theories of these components.

A principle advantage of a correspondence theory is that it accounts for the apparent correlation between the aspects of reality and the truth-value of a proposition. When the cat is on the mat, the proposition that the cat is on the mat is true. If the cat gets off the mat, that proposition is not true. Therefore, a change in the cat correlates with a change in the proposition. Why? The correspondence theory predicts this correlation by analyzing truth as a connection to reality.

A principle challenge, on the other hand, is to understand the nature of the connection. There are metaphysical and epistemological worries. On the metaphysical side, there is the worry that a correspondence relation is intolerably mysterious. Correspondence is not analyzable in terms of familiar physical relations, like distance or force. So what is correspondence? Some philosophers worry that by analyzing truth as *correspondence* you exchange the mystery of truth for a greater mystery. On the epistemology side, there is the worry that you could never know whether a proposition corresponds with things beyond your head, since you can't get outside your head to see things as they are. The worry here is that you cannot know whether any proposition is true if truth requires correspondence.

Another challenge arises from alleged counterexamples. It is true that there are no hobbits. Yet, it is unclear how a true proposition about what is not real could correspond to something that is real.

A common response to the challenges involves developing theories of the components involved. For example, there are structural accounts of correspondence designed to remove the metaphysical and epistemological mysteries. Moreover, there are accounts of negative facts, which serve as correspondents for negative truths.

1. Components of a correspondence theory

The correspondence theory is about a connection between the things that are true and the world. The idea that truth connects to reality is the kernel that gives rise to many articulations and versions of the correspondence theory. These versions differ with respect to how they answer the following three questions:

1. What sort of thing can be true?
2. What sort of thing does a true thing correspond to?
3. What is the nature of the correspondence between true things and the world?

These questions are about the components of correspondence. When a true proposition corresponds to something, there are three components: the true proposition, the correspondence, and the something the true proposition corresponds to. To flesh out one's correspondence theory, one will need theories of these three components.

Here are some representative examples of how correspondence theorists have answered the first question. [Tarski](#) (1944: 342, n. 5) proposes that true things are particular sentences or classes of sentences. For example, some pixels here display a particular sentence. This sentence is the sort of thing that can be true or false, according to Tarski. Other philosophers have thought, however, that while sentences can represent propositions, there is more to a proposition than ink on page or pixels on a screen. Thus, at one time, [Armstrong](#) (1997: 131, 188) suggests that true things are mental states. Later, he proposes that true things are abstract properties of a certain sort (2004: 15-6). [Rasmussen](#) (2014: 85-119) theorizes that true things are abstract states of affairs, which in turn are organized complexes of properties or concepts. (For more on true things, see [propositions, sentences and statements](#).)

Regarding the second question, one common answer is that true things correspond to [facts](#). What are facts? In this context, the term "fact" is a label for whatever makes true things true.

One's theory of the nature of true things affects one's account of the things to which true things correspond. Suppose you think true things are either sentences or mental states. Then you could accept the following correspondence theory proposed by [David](#) (2015):

x is true if and only if x corresponds to some state of affairs [facts] that obtains.

To illustrate, the sentence, 'snow is white', is true if and only if it corresponds to an obtaining state of affairs of *snow being white*.

This theory will not help, however, if one accepts the theory that true things are themselves abstract state of affairs. For then a theory of truth reduces to a theory of obtaining, and David's theory says nothing about how a state of affairs manages to obtain.

One's theory of true things also affects one's account of the correspondence relation. Kirkham (1992: 119-120) divides theories of correspondence into two categories: in one category, there are theories that treat the correspondence relation as a *structural* relation (what he calls "correspondence as congruence"); in the other category are theories that treat correspondence as a non-structural *correlation* between truth-bearers and pieces of reality. The difference between these accounts turns precisely on whether true things have component parts that comprise a structure. True things have parts if, for example, they are sentences composed of words, or if they are beliefs composed of objects (see, for example, Russel). If, by contrast, true things are abstract entities that lack component parts (see, for example, Merricks 2007 and Austin 1950), then it is less clear how they can have a structure. Thus, the nature of correspondence turns on the nature of the things that can be true.

While particular versions of the correspondence theory have serious ontological commitments, the core theory is ontologically versatile. Correspondence theorists typically think that truth is a property and that correspondence is a relation. Yet, a *nominalist* who rejects the existence of properties and relations could still accept a minimal correspondence theory. For example, one could articulate the connection between truth and reality as follows:

A proposition is true if and only if the world is the way the proposition says it is.

This theory is lightweight. Rather than treat truth and correspondence as real objects, this lightweight theory translates "truth" and "correspondence" in terms that are nominalist friendly. This theory may capture the spirit of Aristotle's statement about truth: "To say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true" (Aristotle 1989, 1011b).

Additional evidence of the versatility of the correspondence theory is that it is compatible with extreme antirealist theories of the external world. To illustrate, suppose all reality is reducible to your private mental states. Then you cannot access a world outside your own mind, since there is no such world. Even still, you could have thoughts that correspond to patterns of experiences within your mind. These thoughts would then be true, according to the correspondence theory. This scenario illustrates that a correspondence theorist can be a radical subjectivist (see [realism and antirealism](#)). The correspondence theory at its core is that truth consists in a connection to some reality, whatever its nature.

2. Benefits of a correspondence theory

There are a number of potential benefits of a correspondence theory. Here are three representative examples. First, a correspondence theory provides an account of why differences in reality correlate with a difference in a proposition's truth-value. For example, suppose a cat, Tibbles, is on some mat. Then the proposition, <Tibbles is on a mat>, is true. Next, suppose Tibbles gets off the mat. Then the location of the cat is different. Simultaneously, the truth-value of <Tibbles is on the mat> is also different. It is no longer true. This correlation between a difference in a cat and a difference in a proposition is puzzling: how can a change in a cat result in a change in a proposition? The correspondence theory solves this puzzle by providing an account of why truth is sensitive to reality. According to the correspondence theory, truth is sensitive to reality because truth consists in a connection to reality.

A second potential benefit of a correspondence theory is that it may help explain why humans spend so much effort to obtain truth. If truth is a matter of correspondence with reality, then to know truth is to know something about the real world—and this knowledge helps people navigate the real world. Suppose, by contrast, that truth has no connection with reality. Then to know that a proposition is true is to know something about that proposition only. It would be like knowing the font of a sentence. The font of a sentence tells us nothing about whether the sentence is about anything real. Similarly, if truth is not a connection to reality, then to know that a proposition is true is not to know about anything real beyond the proposition itself. In this case, it is mysterious why humans value truth at all. If, instead, truth is a connection to reality, then this mystery is gone.

Third, a correspondence theory provides an account of truth. This result is a benefit to those who desire an account of truth, especially if alternative accounts are unsatisfactory.

3. Objections to correspondence theories

Objections to the correspondence theory fall into three classes. First, there are objections based upon apparent counterexamples to the correspondence theory. The most notable of these is the objection that a true proposition about the *non-existence* of something cannot correspond to anything because such a proposition is not about anything that *exists* (see [negative facts](#)). A few of the other hard cases include disjunctions, necessary truths about abstract things, and counterfactual propositions. The only way to explain the truth of such propositions, critics argue, is to posit “funny”, unanalyzable facts as their correspondents. David (1994: 120) calls objections like these ‘the problem of funny facts’.

Second, there are the objections that emphasize the difficulty of explaining the nature of correspondence. Many philosophers have asked how it is possible for propositions to systematically link up with the pieces of reality they are about (Heidegger 1967: 78–9. Cf. Lewis 1986: 180). Included here is the concern that a match between truth and reality cannot be known

or mentally apprehended, especially if propositions are supposed to correspond to an external world outside one's perspective. After all, we can't see the correspondence between truth and the world. Rasmussen calls this class of objections 'the problem of matching.'

Third, there are objections that seek to reveal implausible consequences of the correspondence theory. A famous example is the so-called [slingshot argument](#). This sort of argument aims to show that, contrary to what correspondence theorists believe, true propositions about different things all correspond to the same thing.

Responses to objections often involve providing an account of the components of correspondence (of true things, the world, or the correspondence relation). Thus, for example, one response to the problem of funny facts is to give an analysis of negative facts in terms of real *lacks* of things. A different response is to understand correspondence recursively: for example, to handle negative truths, one may suppose that a proposition corresponds to something either by directly corresponding to some positive reality or by its negation failing to directly correspond to anything. Similarly, in response to the problem of matching and the slingshot argument, there are accounts of the correspondence relation in terms of more basic relations, such as exemplification or reference. These accounts are designed to make sense of how true propositions can correspond to the things they are about.

To illustrate, consider the theory that a proposition is an organization of concepts. For example, the proposition that Tibbles is on the mat consists of the following three concepts: a concept of Tibbles, a concept of the on relation, and a concept of the mat. These three concepts are then bundled together in an ordered tuple, which is the proposition. This proposition is true if and only if the following conditions hold: (i) all three of its conceptual constituents refers to something, and (ii) the things referred to by the constituents have the same order as—or are isomorphic to—the order of the conceptual constituents. Thus, we have an account of correspondence without the need for an unanalyzable correspondence relation.

The structural account above provides a foundation for addressing the epistemological worry that it is impossible to know whether a proposition corresponds to something. Suppose vision allows one to see that a cat is on a mat, while introspection allows one to grasp the proposition that a cat is on a mat. Then one can compare the order of the proposition's conceptual components with the order of the cat and the mat. If they match, then the proposition in one's mind corresponds to the cat and the mat—and one thus has a basis for inferring that the proposition is *true*.

Alternatively, one might insist that various components of correspondence are simply unanalyzable. Some philosophers have suggested, for example, that the relation of correspondence is graspable directly via immediate experience of its instances (see Moore 1953: 276–7; Fumerton 2002: 52; cf. Englebretsen 2006: 153). Alternatively, if we do not enjoy a direct grasp of correspondence, perhaps it is acceptable to posit a relation of correspondence to explain how truth connects to reality. Similarly, perhaps it is acceptable to posit negative facts as the correspondents for negative truths.

Dealing with objections highlights a certain tradeoff one encounters when developing a correspondence theory. On the one hand, if one declines to take on a detailed theory of the components of correspondence, the objections loom large. For example, it is mysterious how changes to a concrete cat on a mat could manage to make any difference to an abstract proposition in your mind. A structural account of correspondence can reduce the mystery.

However, the more detailed the account, the more metaphysically heavy the theory. Consider, for example, the structural account above. It requires the existence of an ordering relation. Therefore, unlike the lightweight theory, the structural theory is off limits to nominalists. Moreover, it is off limits to non-structural correlation theorists. Hence, while a heavyweight correspondence theory may stand stronger against objections, it is less inclusive. Correspondence theorists must therefore balance many considerations when seeking to develop a robust correspondence theory.

See also:

[Facts](#)

[Realism and antirealism](#)

[Slingshot arguments](#)

[Tarski's definition of truth](#)

[Negative facts](#)

[Propositions, sentences, and statements](#)

References and further reading

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