



An Antropomorphic Exploration of the Character of Truth

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Abstract

The nature of knowledge as justified true belief in traditional Western epistemology has been a topic of debate over the years. Findings showed that in the various disagreements one can identify two main issues: whether knowledge is simply true belief or whether knowledge is justified true belief. Truth in both groups is not an orphan being the one that is constant in both definitions. I think this is the case because truth has a dynamic character that makes it attractive to everyone irrespective of the type of knowledge in question. This dynamism is expressed in various proverbs and wise sayings especially in African philosophy. The aim of this work is to make bare the ethical character of truth which is the main reason why it has been personified and given human attributes. The methodology to be adopted in achieving this aim is a critical analysis of the concept of truth and the relationship it has with human psychology. This will lead us to the conclusion that any idea of knowledge that is acceptable must incorporate the ethical dimension.

Keywords: Truth, Anthropomorphism, Virtue, knowledge, Yoruba proverb.

I. Introduction

The word Anthropomorphism has Greek root. It is a combination of two words, *anthropos* (human) and *morphe* (form). It means attributing human form or character to inanimate things. Human form in this case can either be physical, psychological, sensual or moral (DiSalvo *et al*, 2004). This topic became of interest when we find out there are different proverbs and phrases that frame truth as a social concept. Truth is described in many ways as having capacity to move, to provide freedom, to punish and to expose injustice. I argue here that all these attributes are actually human attributes which belong to epistemic agents but erroneously confer on the concept itself. Though many epistemologists concerned themselves with the epistemic and logical character of truth, exploring its social character is a way of

delving into social epistemology which helps us to analyse how we should react to ourselves during agreement and disagreement in a social setting. The questions that can be raised on this is, whether truth in form of proposition or belief have capacity to engender social justice or correct injustice without human intervention?

In *Theaetetus* Socrates laid the foundation of Western traditional idea of knowledge when he defined knowledge as true belief plus account. If a person knows, it is taken that what is known is the truth, the person believes this truth and when called upon, justification in terms of reason or fact can be provided as support for this belief. This makes knowledge an important concept in human society because it has become the basis upon which many social structures rest. The concepts of Trust, Freedom, Democracy, and Respect for others are the fabrics of modern day society because human beings have come to know or understand that these ideas help promote peace which societies need to survive on and make progress or develop.

These concepts would not have much meaning if not for the understanding that is generated by our idea of knowledge. Trust for others or in a system is predicated on the belief that those in question are truthful or will always stands by the truth regardless. In this wise one has a free mind to trust fellow human beings in a social setting because of consistency of ideas or claims and it is on this that consensus and agreement are built on.

Perhaps it is the importance of this that necessitates philosophers and scientists alike to develop interest in fashioning out the specific form and characteristic of truth. This project was embarked on by Socrates in Plato's books *Meno* and *Theaetetus*. Socrates helps us to see Belief, Truth and Justification as conditions of knowledge. Socrates told us in the *Meno* (Guthrie, 1956) that belief is an ingredient of knowledge and argued that the two are not synonymous (Meno 85c). He showed the difference between knowledge and true belief with his story of going to Larissa, a town in ancient Greece (Meno 97b). While in the



Theaetetus he showed that justification is an important ingredient of knowledge but it can create a problem of regress and as such makes knowledge impossible or difficult to attain it.

The character of truth in relation to knowledge has not been in doubt for the fact that every knowledge claim must be true. It is a consensus among philosophers that the idea of false knowledge is non-existent; knowledge must necessarily incorporate truth. Nevertheless, true belief as different from true knowledge is dynamic in character. To some, truth is absolute and to others it is relative. By absolute truth, we mean something unchanging with public character or fixed character. The belief that truth is relative according to the Sophists projects it as a creation of human agents with the argument that it is discovered according to varying perspectives. Though, a belief can either be true or false, yet time and tides can make a true belief today become false tomorrow and vice versa.

However, the focus of this work is not about the relativity of truth but the dynamic character of truth which Socrates likened to the “status of *dandalous*”-“it flies away when not tethered”. The tethering of truth suggests that truth is mobile and requires a chain to keep it in check and this underscores its anthropomorphic or spirited conception. The belief of many ancient people including philosophers like Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes is that mobility suggests life force and that is one reason why their originative substances possess this characteristic (Cornford, 1912:7).

In many cultures, there is personification of truth or a kind of transfer epithet; where human personality has been transfer to this important concept. Truth is seen as capable of revealing itself, capable of motion, virtuous, tenacious, and obstinate. Why this is so, is what this paper will be devoted to.

What is Truth?

Epistemic truth like most primary concepts is difficult to analyse. G.E. Moore (1903) already drew attention to such difficulty in his exposition on Good, which is a primary ethical concept. For Moore, ethical concepts are difficult to analyse or breakdown into constituent parts because by their nature they are simple terms which are just known from their everyday usage. Such concepts according to him, are commonsensical rather than analytical.

Truth is a concept that is used in everyday conversation, be it in political matters, religious,

metaphysics, science, logic etc. Perhaps it is for this reason one cannot say exactly what it points to. Though linguistically people make statements like “it is the truth, this is the truth, very true, this is not because truth refers to a particular thing in reality but because we have come to know its uses in different context. In this wise, the word truth is better described as a quality or characteristic that can inhere in facts, beliefs, and statements. Like colour, it can be found in objects and things but does not have a separate existence. It is at best a quality of being exact or open. Truth has a lot to do with the concept of certainty which in itself is subjective (Wittgenstein, Proposition 30, *On Certainty*). In Wittgenstein opinion, certainty, in spite of its subjectivity could be a thing unto itself. He asserts that some propositions are like ‘hinges’ for the rest of language” because they have to remain fixed for other things to move around them (May-Hobbs, 2023). However, in our everyday conversations and speeches, we don’t seem to get confused about the meaning of truth when we have a grasp of the subject of our enquiry. One can argue that the concept of truth belongs to this category of words that “stands like a riverbed (in spite of the constant movement of the waters) that must remain stable for the river to flow” (May-Hobbs, 2023). It is not surprising then to see various definitions of knowledge involving the concept or idea of truth. The non-definitive nature of knowledge notwithstanding, almost all epistemologists attest that truth is embedded in knowledge.

In epistemology, there are three classical ways of looking at truth. These classical theories are more about true belief, true statement or true information rather than truth *simpliciter*. The most popular among these theories is the correspondence theory of truth. It is an empirical theory which agrees with common sense view of people. The theory establishes a relation between a proposition, belief or fact with the reality. The correspondence theory says that “truth is an agreement between a proposition and a fact” (Velasquez, 2005:445). Fact, in this definition is a substitute for reality. It presents truth as a metaphysical concept which describes reality the way it is. So, the scientific claim that “water boils at 100 degree centigrade is seen as true because the reality of water’s behaviour is described in exact term. However, one needs to mention that some “facts” still have element of social construction to them” because the world or reality depends on human awareness which are products of previous beliefs or experience of the individual agent [Bird, 2018]. What is to be noted in the above submission is that



without belief or fact, there can be no truth. And the truth of any belief depends on something outside the belief itself (Velasquez,2005:446). This definition establishes consistency between a claim and the fact outside there.

Another notable theory is the coherence theory of truth. It seeks truth in the relationship between a belief and other beliefs within a system. This theory recognizes different epistemic systems. It avers that a belief should not be measure outside the system it belongs to. For instance, a belief of science should not be measure or tested by the paradigm of religion and vice versa. So, water boils at 100 degree centigrade is true because it agrees with other verified characteristics of water and heat. If it was already established that the temperature of water do move from Zero degree centigrade when heated, that will be an evidence or confirmation that it can get to 100 degree centigrade or more, coupled with the capacity of water to boil under a high temperature.

Brand Blandesh while advocating for consistency as the paradigm of truth for instance argues that “A judgment of fact can be verified only by the sort of apprehension that can present us with a fact and this must be a further judgment. For him, an agreement between judgments is best described not as a correspondence but as coherence” (Blanshard, 1941:464-465). Truth became consistency of a belief with other beliefs of a rational community. However, since there are different rational communities, there is the tendency that a particular belief may be acceptable within a community because of its consistency with theirs while being rejected by another community for its inconsistency with their already accepted beliefs.

The last theory of truth for our concern is the pragmatic theory, which sees the problem of previous theories as that of system building. It contends with correspondence and coherence theories because they assigned value to externalism and internalism of justification respectively. Pragmatists believe this would lead to the problem of system bias or conflict rather than the core issue of apprehending reality itself. So, pragmatism jettison system defense and embrace workability of beliefs. For pragmatists, correspondence truth is dependent in large part to individual experience, while coherence depends on community of experiences, but lack practical value since false beliefs too can be coherent with each other, just like true beliefs. For the above reasons they argued that truth is better identified in terms of their impact or consequences (Velasquez,2005: 457). In

this wise, if a beliefs works or add value to life then it is true.

One problem that can be observed in the pragmatic consideration is that beliefs will not have constant status and as such lacks the characteristic of being absolute. A belief may work yesterday but fail today. In other words, one would have accepted a belief that worked coincidentally as true or it will be very difficult to reject beliefs that work coincidentally as true. The belief that the sun revolves around the earth had produced some scientific breakthrough, but that belief is not currently true. Since Copernicus revolution, we now know that it is the earth that revolves round the sun. The current belief too is working, how it will fare tomorrow cannot be immediately determined. Notwithstanding, pragmatism establishes a relationship between a claim and its value or consequence. One will not be wrong, if truth of the pragmatists is interpreted as a one-at-a-time consistency between a claim and its consequence.

The various problems of truth become escalated in the postmodernist era of philosophy. Though, postmodernist idea of truth may be difficult to give a univocal definition, one can couch it to mean truth is not objective or absolute. They argued that truth is not something outside the human mind that human beliefs should conform to. They rather see truth as a product of the mind (Pardi, 2015). For instance, the analysis of “How the True World became a Fable” suggests that Nietzsche believes truth to be a wish, which can be successfully imposed on others. His slave-master morality doctrine too is a testament that truth is the wish of the powerful. This is an indication that there is a relationship between truth and the claimant of truth. But what sort of relationship can we say exists between truth and Humans? This will be the next focus.

Truth and Anthropomorphism

What truth is or what it has become cannot be explained outside the impression people have about it or the impression they have created from it. A careful examination of this concept shows that truth has been given a human face or attributes which makes it an interesting issue to discuss. A legendary story was told about truth thus:

The Truth and the Lie met on the road one day. The Lie said to the Truth: “*It’s a marvelous day today*”! The Truth looked up to the skies and sighed, for the day was truly beautiful. They walk together for a while, until they reach a beautiful well. The Lie told the Truth: “The water in the well



was very nice, let's take a swim together!" The Truth, once again suspicious, tests the water and discovers that it indeed, is very nice. They undressed and started to bathe. Suddenly, the Lie jumped out of the well, puts on the clothes of the Truth and ran off towards a nearby village. The furious Truth leaped out of the well and ran to find the Lie and get her clothes back. The Villagers, seeing the Naked Truth, are horrified and looked away with contempt and rage. The poor Truth returned to the well and disappeared, forever hiding her shame. And since that day, the lie travels the world, clothed as the Truth (<https://storytelling.co.za/thenakedtruthandlie>).

Truth in this story is depicted as human in form and character. The naked character of truth is to say that it is open, plain and exact. Its character of running after lies is an indication that it is mobile. This mobile nature is to expose and illuminate lie or falsity. Truth in this regard, is interested in maintaining its attributes of being honest and moral. And we can see this in many of the theories of truth handed over to us since classical period of philosophy.

For instance, the correspondence theory of truth gives the impression that reality is fixed and unchanging as such a statement or belief can capture any of its part. And if this is done appropriately, the individual who had done this can be said to be successful by overcoming deception (saying the truth). Truth in this wise becomes a tool for measuring or determining success or failure. When one hears the saying, "the truth shall set you free", one would understand why truth has taken up the garment of success determinant or a tool for freedom or liberation. In this wise truth is seen as a tool for exposing hidden crime, bad behaviours and some other societal ills which are shackles of oppression. However, I think truth can liberate only if human beings conscientiously use it as a tool of justice. This is because it is possible for those concerned to close their eyes or mind to whatever the truth exposed and under such circumstance, justice will not be served.

The coherence theory of truth hammers on consistency of beliefs with one another thereby projecting a moral concern for honesty. To be honest is telling oneself the truth, this means what one's claim must be in tandem with what the person has in mind or what the person has taken as a standard. So, to speak the truth is to align with societal or individual standard. This idea of truth projects the idea of being at peace either with oneself or the community one belongs to, since

inconsistent claims with the existing standard can generate conflict. Truth in this wise becomes a stabilizer. This is the basis for the proverb "say the truth and the devil will be ashamed". The devil in monotheistic Abrahamic religions is seen as the harbinger for trouble, problems and conflicts. Since the truth can ward off such evils, it then becomes a means of shaming the devil, who will ordinarily love such scenarios to happen.

In spite of this, it is not impossible to see truth as a causal factor for crisis. As a matter of fact, the same truth that liberates someone may put another person in trouble. A peaceful marriage can be thrown in crisis by the truth of adultery depending on how concerned couple manages the information.

The workability criterion espoused by pragmatic theory indicates that truth is a doing word. In other words, the theory is asking what your claim can do. Such expectation presupposes action oriented idea. Statements are seen in the light of having ability to get things done or having the ability to make impression on us. Truth in the above analysis seems to possess certain character that confers on itself some moral attributes, since success, honesty, and shamefulness are virtues.

The Ethical Character of Truth

The concept of truth as it has been analysed above, indicates that it has virtuous character. Virtue as a mode of epistemic analysis was introduced into epistemology to resolve the Gettier problem. The Gettier problem in this context projects truth as a logical concept that can be inferred during justification. Gettier was able to point out that truth, belief and justification can exist independently of each other in a claim to knowledge and when it does, knowledge cannot be achieved. The attempt to resolve this conundrum was why Ernest Sosa and Linda Zagzebski in their different strands of virtue epistemology introduced character traits into definition of knowledge as way of providing the missing bond between truth and justification. Perceptual traits and virtue traits of epistemic agents became parts the factors of justification of truth respectively (Battaly, 2018:01). To them, the moral disposition of an epistemic agent is a good ingredient that motivates the search and apprehension of truth.

Consequently, virtue character of epistemic agents rubbed off on their claim to truth. A claim to truth must be justified if the agent in question has good perceptual trait or s/he is a responsible agent. A good perceptual trait or virtue confers responsibility on the agent thereby making



it possible for us to trust the claims of such person. Truth of this nature has shared moral character of trustworthiness with the epistemic agent. This resonates with Virtue epistemologists claim that “epistemic virtue requires an acquired motivation for truth or other epistemic goods for which the agent is partly responsible” (Battaly, 2018:2).

Plato already suggested to us that there is a relationship between virtue and knowledge in the *Meno*. In his argument if anything is beneficial it must be knowledge. Virtue to him is beneficial therefore it is knowledge (*Meno*, 89a). I think this is where Socrates espouses his pragmatic idea of truth because to talk about benefit is to talk about the impact or consequences of truth. Consequently, a wise person in the society will be a virtuous person. What is not clear to Socrates in the dialogue is why a virtuous person who is knowledgeable cannot teach virtue to others (*Meno*, 89e).

Perhaps this is because according Linda Zagzebski, virtue is not a skill, so it cannot be taught. She reiterates this when she argued that “an act which exhibits skill when one has the knowledge associated with that skill and performs the act in accordance with the knowledge...But for an act to exhibit virtue, it must proceed from an enduring character trait and one must choose it for its own sake” (1996:103-106)

Given this perspective, truth claims will share the virtue of open-mindedness, fair-mindedness, intellectual courage and carefulness with their agents. These virtues can be inferred from the legendry story highlighted above. It is the open-mindedness of truth that made him accept lies proposal to bath in the stream. He was fair and courageous to pursue lies with a bid to expose the deception of lies. These moral characters or traits are another reason why truth is anthropomorphically construed. Since human beings are seen by many as the only moral agents among spirited occupants of the world. Humans therefore, share these virtues with their claims, even when their claims help to build up their personality too. In other words, to know a person, know his/her claims and to accept a claim, know the person that made it. A truthful person is most likely seen as a good and trustworthy person.

II. Conclusion

Truth though an epistemic concept, also has a social character. And the reason is not farfetched, the consistency character of truth as espoused in all classical theories makes people see truth as good. Truth, just as Good are not analysable concepts because they are simple as

argued by Moore in his *Principia Ethica*. Good in Socrates opinion in the *Republic* illuminates truth for epistemic agents to have a firm grasp of issues. The consequence of truth is therefore good and as such virtuous. This lend credence to the proverb that “if lies goes on for a long time, one day truth will catch up with it”. Meaning that lie or falsity which is seen as a vice will become irrelevant if truth appears on the scene.

Human beings are therefore expected to possess the virtue of patience, hoping that the discovery of truth will resolve conflict and social crisis. Truth itself is patient; it does not give up in pursuing lie or falsity as expressed in the myth above but only if humans also do not give up in pursuing justice.

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