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A New Version of the Comparison Objection Against the Correspondence Theory of Truth

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Abstract

This text looks at the comparison objection against the correspondence theory of truth. The objections have usually been a key motivation for abandoning truth as correspondence and/or metaphysical realism but it has some problems, usually not accounted for. These problems are, to some extent, dealt with by the pragmatists tradition and I take inspiration from these writers to develop a new version of the objection. The argument in the text is as follows: There exist many, equally real, truth-like concepts. One reason to abandon one truth-like concept, in favour of another, is that the concept does not meet "the requirement of justified use". The correspondence theory of truth cannot meet this requirement because it is not possible to compare our propositions with a mind-independent reality. The correspondence theory should therefore be abandoned in favour of a truth-like concept that does meet this requirement.

The argument in the text does not target all versions of the correspondence theory but only those that combine it with metaphysical realism. The conclusion of the text is that the correspondence theory of truth is incompatible with metaphysical realism and that, at least, one of these positions must be rejected.

Keywords: the correspondence theory, truth, pragmatism, the comparison objection, concept pluralism

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1. Introduction

Truth is central to many debates, both in philosophy and outside it. Questions such as, "are there moral truths", "what makes counterfactuals true" and "how do we recognize when something is true", are all important and frequently debated. How truth is defined and understood certainly has large impacts on these debates. To answer these questions in a satisfactory way we first need a proper understanding of what truth is. There exist many different proposals, the most common are probably, the correspondence theory, the coherentist theory and pragmatism. The correspondence theory of truth seems to be the natural place to start (Vision, p.32) since the theory has a high initial plausibility. This is because it matches our commonsensical understanding of truth. The theory states (approximately), "a proposition is true if it corresponds with a fact or reality". Despite the theory's commonsensical nature it has been the target of much criticism. I am, in this text, only interested in one of these, namely, the comparison objection. The coherence theory of truth holds that truth consists in coherence (C.S. Walker 2018, p.219). The basic idea is that propositions are true if they are coherent with a coherent and complete set of beliefs. Pragmatism is a collection of many different conceptions of truth. Some common ideas are that truth is "what is believed at the end of inquiry" or that truth can in some sense be "cashed out" in usefulness.

This text will argue that the correspondence theory of truth is unacceptable. I will do this with a modified version of the comparison objection which has been inspired by the pragmatist tradition. I will begin in section 2 to describe the correspondence theory and which specific version of it my argument is meant to target. In section 3 we will examine the form this objection usually takes, namely, that the theory inevitably leads to skepticism and thus cannot be accepted. We will see some of the problems that make the comparison objection weak and why it should not convince us to leave the correspondence theory. I shall in section 4 examine how pragmatists have stated the objection and I will argue that it is an improvement but that it introduces new problems, mostly due to the pragmatist methodology, and that neither this version of the comparison objection is a strong reason against truth as correspondence. But there are lessons to be learned from the pragmatists and I shall attempt to make a new objection inspired by their argument in section 5. My argument will avoid some of the problems with the pragmatist method but also avoid some common arguments against the comparison objection, most importantly the objection that the argument is

"missplaced". There will be a brief detour in section 5.2 to examine concept pluralism. This will be important to make sense of my argument and I will use the thesis to defend my argument from a common criticism targeting the comparison objection. My argument is in section 6 defended against potential counter-arguments. The text ends with a brief summary.

2. The Correspondence Theory of Truth

The correspondence theory of truth is the most commonly accepted truth theory amongst philosophers (Bourget. & Chalmers 2023, p.8)[1]. The theory comes in many forms and there does not exist one unified version. But all versions have something like this in mind, "a proposition is true when it corresponds to a fact (or reality)" (Rasmussen 2014, p1). There is a common worry that this definition of truth is far too trivial (Marino 2006 p.416 & Vision 2004, p.31) and that any theory of truth could formulate their theory along these lines (Marino 2006, p.420). What needs to be added, to avoid being a mere platitude, is specifications to "propositions", "facts" and the "correspondence relationship" (Howat 2020, p.700 & Rasmussen 2014, p.7). Many different accounts have been produced regarding all three elements. Correspondence therefore might best be seen as a cluster of different truth theories (Vision 2004, p.23). I will attempt to formulate a critique that targets correspondence theories in general and will therefore not go too deep into how these terms are specified in different versions of the theory. The argument raised in this text will, however, not target all forms of correspondence but only those that accept metaphysical realism. A correspondence theory does not entail metaphysical realism (Rasmussen 2014, p.17 & Vision 2004, p.13) nor does metaphysical realism entail a correspondence theory (Rasmussen 2014, p.17). My argument will not target either correspondence or metaphysical realism but only a version that combines both in the following form: "a proposition is true iff it corresponds to reality", where reality is understood as a mind-independent reality. Propositions could be exchanged to any truth-bearer one finds most plausible[2], for example belief instead, but I will simply talk of propositions for simplicity's sake. I also try to not assume any special understanding of the correspondence relation and the objection should work with any common account of correspondence[3]. I should also mention that even though a correspondence theory does not

[1] 51% accept the correspondence theory inclusively and 48% exclusively.
[2] See Kirkham (1994, pp.54-63) for an elaboration of truth-bearers.
[3] See Rasmussen 2014, Chapter 5 for more information regarding the correspondence relation.

entail realism, they are often connected. Rasmussen (2014, p.18) writes, “The correspondence theory may support realism” and Vision (2004 p.15) says, “there is a serious tension between, on the one hand, idealism or other forms of antirealism and, on the other, correspondence”. Marino (2006 p.419) lays out objectivity, “that snow is white is a fact independently of what we believe, how we see the world, and so on”, as an important quality of the correspondence theory. So, to show that correspondence is incompatible with metaphysical realism would target many prominent theories.

Let us return to mind-independence and clarify what is meant here with the term. Mind-independence is usually seen as a requirement for a realist account and Kirkham (1994, p.73) defines it like this: “neither its existence or nature depends on the existence of any mind, nor on the thoughts of any mind, nor on the conceptual schema of any mind, not on the epistemic capacities, limitations, or achievements of any mind”. Now some propositions clearly depend on a mind, take for example the proposition “Henry thinks of a horse”. This can still make sense on a realist account since it can be true no matter what anyone thinks about it. Even if Henry himself does not believe it, he could perhaps think of a horse subconsciously and thus not be aware of it so the proposition still comes out as true on a realist conception[4] (Kirkham 1994, pp.76-77).

The correspondence theory is also compatible with a pluralistic account of truth. It is for example possible (without contradiction) to believe that the truth value of empirical claims is determined by correspondence while mathematical claims’ truth value is determined by coherence. I believe my objection targets correspondence even if it is supplemented with other theories in certain areas.

As I final note on the theory let us look at which truth project they are interested in. Kirkham (1994, pp.1-40) lays out three main truth projects philosophers have engaged with. These are (1) *the metaphysical project*, (2) *the justification project* and (3) *the speech-act project* (these can be further divided in sub-categories (pp.20-21). What I want to highlight for this text is that the metaphysical project and the justification project often gets confused and it will be important that we can separate them going forward. The metaphysical projects attempt to analyze what truth consists in. It tries to answer the question, “what is it for a proposition to be true?”. The justification project attempts to find what characteristics most true propositions possess and most false propositions lack so we can have a criteria which helps us determine which propositions are likely true. To answer the justification project we

[4] Some problems remain of similar types, see Kirkham 1994 pp.77-78 for a closer look but I cannot dwell on them here.

need first an answer to the metaphysical project but the reverse is not the case. One can hold that truth consists in correspondence but that consistency with other beliefs is a good indicator of truth. The classical version of the comparison objection tries to refute the correspondence theory as an answer to the metaphysical project, in other words, it maintains that truth cannot consist in correspondence. This is an important point to remember going forwards.

3. The comparison objection

The basic idea behind the comparison objection is that the correspondence theory requires us to be able to compare our beliefs or propositions against mind-independent reality and that this comparison is impossible or nonsensical. Many philosophers have offered versions of this argument:

> "Hilary Putnam credits Kant with teaching us that "the whole idea of comparing our conceptual system with a world of things-in-themselves ... to see if the conceptual system 'copies' the unconceptualized reality is incoherent." (McDermid 1998, p.780)

> "For the very idea of the believer-independent world, and the items within it to which beliefs or sentences might correspond, seem graspable only if we could somehow step outside of our corpus of belief, our practices, or that with which we have dealings." (Misak 2018, p.284)

> "Walker (2001, 155) puts it in the form of a rhetorical question: "How can we say anything about a reality that is genuinely independent of us and of our ways of thinking about it?"" (Vision 2004, p.19)

This is only a sample of the different versions of the objection[5]. The alleged impossibility of knowing things "as they are in themselves" is central in nearly all arguments for versions of subjectivism (Blackburn 2005, p.33) but it need not be used to argue against realism. McDermid (1998, p.801) claims that the objection is a clear non-sequitur. If the argument

[5] See McDermid 1998 for more examples of the objection.

only means to show that the correspondence theory implies skepticism it, on its own, provides no reason to accept that the theory is false. But we can summarise the objection in a way that makes it valid. The central claim seems to be that correspondence theory implies skepticism (because we cannot compare propositions to "reality") and since skepticism is false (or undesirable) correspondence is false (or ought to be avoided) (Howat 2020, p.867). The argument can be stated as follows:

1. The correspondence theory implies skepticism. (Since we cannot compare propositions with mind-independent reality.)
2. Skepticism is false.
   Therefore:
3. The correspondence theory is false.

The objection can also be stated indirectly. The objection would then be that a correspondence theory implies x and that x in turn implies skepticism (Howat, 2020, p.697). I will focus solely on the direct version stated above. Stated that way, the argument is valid but the objection is still quite clearly lacking. Perhaps the strongest counter-argument is that the objection is "misplaced" (Kirkham 1994, pp.112-114). I will return to this objection shortly but before that we should take a closer look at both premises in the argument since both are debatable.

The first premise is that the correspondence theory implies skepticism because we can never check whether or not a proposition corresponds with "reality". But correspondence only implies skepticism under the assumption that, if truth is identified as property F (correspondence in this case), then S only knows p if S knows that p have F (Marian 2025, Section 9.2)[6]. This is clearly implausible. Consider the following: water is identified as H2O but S can know that the Thames is full of water without knowing that it is full of H2O (Marian 2025, Section 9.2). The second problem with the first premise is that it is simply not established. There are many attempts to answer skepticism, for example Moore's appeal to common sense, contextualism and various externalist theories of knowledge, all of these are compatible with the correspondence theory of truth (Vision 2004, p.18). Now it is possible that all of these arguments fail but the defender of the comparison objection would need to show how. This is something they rarely do.

[6] If truth = F, then S knows that x is true, only if S knows that x is F is the formulation used but the same general point can be made with this more minimal and plausible principle.

Let us move on to the second premise. Why should we be so certain that skepticism is false? Skepticism is usually, and possibly rightly, considered a very problematic position. It would mean that we can have no knowledge at all. This would mean that all of our attempts at acquiring knowledge would be futile. But the argument seems to approach the problem of skepticism from the wrong way round. The skeptics' claim is that we do not have knowledge. The way to resolve this is, reasonably, to first define what knowledge is and what is required for us to have it before investigating whether or not we possess it. The impulse, when advancing the comparison objection, seems to be to first reject skepticism (rather dogmatically) and then defining truth and knowledge in such a way that skepticism can be avoided. Redefining truth seems to be the wrong way to deal with the problem of skepticism (Kirkham 1994, p.113).

Back to Kirkham's objection that the comparison objection is "misplaced". The comparison objection confuses or at least ignores the difference between the "nature" of truth on the one hand and a "criteria" of truth on the other (Kirkham 1994, p.112)[7]. These are two separate questions and should also be analysed separately. You can clearly think that correspondence is inadequate as a criteria of truth while still maintaining that it is the nature of truth. It is unclear if the objection can show that the correspondence theory is problematic as an answer to the metaphysical project and not only inadequate as an answer to the justification project.

4. The Pragmatists Objection

The comparison objection has been a central argument historically for pragmatists (McDermid 1998, pp.776-777). I, however, think that when advanced by the pragmatist the argument takes a slightly different form which will help illuminate how the objection can avoid the counter-arguments raised earlier. We can then see how the classical objection can be modified to strengthen it. First, allow me to provide a very short overview of pragmatism. I will focus on the methods used in the tradition and not the actual proposed theories of truth they provide since they are not our main concern here. Pragmatism is first and foremost a methodology for analyzing and understanding concepts (Misak 2018 p.283). The founder of pragmatism C.S. Pierce thinks that there are three different levels of understanding we can

[7] A similar point is raised by Vision (2004, p.221).

have of our concepts (Misak 2004, p.12). Where philosophers before him analysed two of these, namely clearness and distinction, Pierce usually focused on the third, pragmatic adequacy (Howat 2020, pp. 687-689). To have full understanding of a concept all three of the following must be achieved (Misak 2004, p.12):

1. tell what objects the specified term picks out (clearness),
2. provide a definition of the term (distinctness),
3. be able to specify what we would expect (what the experiential consequences are (Hookway 2014, p.167)) if a hypothesis containing the term is true (pragmatic adequacy).

Many prominent pragmatists, C.S. Pierce and William James for example, accept the correspondence theory as a definition of truth (Haack 1976, p.241) but they viewed it as pragmatically empty[8]. Pragmatists analysed concepts according to the pragmatic maxim, which have been stated in many different ways. The most common phrasing of it is: "Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then our conception of those effects is the whole of our conception of the object" (Howat 2020, p.689). The maxim is not meant to be an explicit definition and the many different versions of the maxim are , possibly, somewhat in conflict. Hookway summarizes the maxim as follows:

> "the clarification is achieved by providing a list of descriptions of the effects that we take the object to have; presumably, this will involve descriptions of how we think the object would behave and of how we think other objects would behave as a result of being affected by the object of the conception." (2012, p.171)

But how does any of this matter for the comparison objection? The goal of the pragmatists is not to deny the correspondence as a mere definition of truth (the classical pragmatists all accept truth as correspondence (Haack 1976, p.241)) but they wish to show the fundamental inadequacy of such a definition, namely that it fails to achieve the third level of clarity. The pragmatists give very distinct answers to how truth should be understood to be able to avoid being pragmatically empty.

[8] Howat 2020 lays forth a different reading of Pierce but this seems to be the most common one.

Kirkham (1994, p.37) writes that Pierce and James are interested in the essence project, which is a part of the larger metaphysical project. This misses important points in their work. “The essence project” tries to find a sentence essentially equivalent to “x is true” (Kirkham 1994, p.14). However, this project is slightly different to the pragmatists since they (at least Pierce (Misak, 2004, p.4)) are not only interested (maybe not even primarily) in the definition of truth but attempts to elucidate the concept. The comparison objection, understood in this way, might be able to avoid the charge of being "misplaced". The pragmatists are interested in the question, “what is a pragmatically adequate definition of truth” (where pragmatically adequate is understood as providing the third level of understanding of the concept). To be able to say what we would expect of a true hypothesis we would need to deal with the “criteria” as well as the “nature” of truth. The pragmatists argument can be stated as:

1. The correspondence theory is pragmatically empty. (Since we cannot compare propositions with mind-independent reality.)
2. Pragmatically empty theories are unacceptable.
   Therefore:
3. The correspondence theory is unacceptable.

The same intuition that is used in justifying the first premises in the classical version, that the correspondence theory leads to skepticism, is used to justify the first premise in this argument. There are, however, two main problems with this version of the objection.

The first of these is concerned with the pragmatist methodology. The objection likely holds no force to those not already accepting pragmatism. It seems like we must accept that definitions that do not fulfill the maxim are meaningless or at least pragmatically empty and that we must avoid these empty definitions for the objection to be persuasive. It might be helpful to provide an answer to the third level of clarity but it certainly does not seem like we are required to do this in order to have usable or meaningful definitions.

The second problem is that this version of the objection seems to change the subject. Most philosophers attempting to provide a definition of truth do not accept the maxim. They are not interested in providing a pragmatically adequate definition but simply in providing a definition. The pragmatist must first show that the question of interest is indeed, “what is a pragmatically adequate definition of truth”, and not only, “what is a sentence essentially equivalent to x is true”. It is, at best, unclear if they can do this. A further problem is that the pragmatic maxim is itself not properly defined. Many different versions have been proposed

and many of them are, at least somewhat, in conflict. This would likely need to be provided before the pragmatic methodology can be properly used and accepted.

So why bring up this version of the objection only to reject it? Well, I think it can provide a useful illustration in how the comparison objection can be modified to avoid the critique of being "misplaced". The objection must begin in a critique of the metaphysical project itself. It should attempt to show that we must place some requirement for adequate definitions and then show that the correspondence theory cannot meet these requirements because of the comparison objection. This is what I will attempt in the next section but I must make a note before leaving the discussion of pragmatism behind. My reading of the pragmatist use of the comparison objection is not the most commonly accepted one. Most do not seem to draw any distinction between the pragmatist version and the classical version of the objection[9]. Even if my reading is wrong or misrepresents the intention of the pragmatists it should not change what possible lessons we can draw from this reading of the argument.

5. The Unusability Objection

I will in this section argue that when concepts are defined in philosophical contexts they must fulfill certain requirements. One of these is “justified use” and it is this requirement that the correspondence theory fails to meet. If this is correct then the correspondence theory of truth is unacceptable. My argument can be stated as follows:

1. Theories that do not meet “the requirement of justified use” are unacceptable.
2. The correspondence theory does not meet “the requirement of justified use”. (Since we cannot compare propositions with mind-independent reality.)
   Therefore:
3. The correspondence theory is unacceptable.

We will look at both of the premises in turn and then analyse the consequences of the argument. The argument that I have laid out here is quite clearly very different from the classical argument we looked at in section 3. It is perhaps different enough to count as a separate objection entirely. They are similar only in the core insight that we cannot compare

[9] For example, McDermid (1998) makes no such distinction.

propositions with reality. The classical version of the objection uses this insight to argue that the correspondence theory leads to skepticism, pragmatists use this insight to argue that correspondence is a pragmatically empty definition and I use the very same insight to argue that the theory cannot meet a requirement of justified use. But my objection might be different enough that it would be misleading to call it a version of the comparison objection, so we can call it "the unusability objection" instead.

My argument rests on an important assumption, namely that of concept pluralism about truth. It is worth beginning with making a small detour to explore this idea and why it is important for my argument.

5.1 Concept Pluralism

Concept pluralism regarding truth means that, in addition to the truth-concept we actually use, there are many other, similar and equally real, truth-like concepts[10]. It is important to note that this is not a thesis of truth pluralism, which is the thesis that different truth concepts are suitable for different areas of discussion (Eklund 2017, p.60). Risberg uses the following toy example to explain concept pluralism:

> "the view that one might call *house pluralism* states that there are many different HOUSE-like concepts, where some include tents and houseboats in their extension while others do not. The HOUSE-like concepts are all equally real and satisfiable — the salient difference is just that we use some of them but not others." (2023, p.543)

So what is a truth-like concept? The main idea is that it would be a concept playing the same role as truth (maybe being the goal (or aim) of inquiry or beliefs) while being coextensively different (Eklund 2017, p.18)[11]. Eklund explains it well:

> "truth functions as something like a norm of acceptance or belief. We can imagine different communities using different truth-like norms for that purpose. One

[10] The formulation is a modified version of Risberg's pluralism about epistemological concepts (2023, p.542).
[11] Eklund discusses normative concepts but I think the sketch works for truth concepts as well.

> community employs the norm: accept that P iff P is true1. Another community employs the norm: accept that P iff P is true2." (2020, p.2068)

One might reasonably ask if different things entirely are being investigated by the different communities, not that different conceptions of truth are being used. It seems clear to me that it is an example where both communities aim for truth (or truth-likeness) but different standards are used by the different communities[12]. One of the strongest reasons to accept concept pluralism in regards to truth is that this seems to be, empirically the case, that many different truth-concepts are used. The correspondence theorist, the coherentist and the pragmatists all accept different concepts of truth, all being conceived of as the aim of inquiry but, plausibly, they differ in coextension.

Concept pluralism does not imply concept indeterminacy, that is to say that our concept is indeterminate between many similar possible concepts. There might very well be one truth-concept which is employed, even across all matters of contexts and discourse.

What concept pluralism does entail is that questions about why we should use one concept and not another make sense. I argue that certain features of a concept can rule it out from being a concept we ought to use. That it is the concept we actually use can matter a great deal, maybe it should be prima facie accepted, but it cannot be the be-all and end-all of the discussion because it is clear that it is determined, in part, by contingent biological, historical and cultural factors (Eklund 2017, p.192). This is not a new idea. Blanshard explains the traditional method of philosophy as:

> "The classical way is to run over instances where the word is applied, as various as possible, and then to look for something common to them in virtue of which it is applied. [...] If a suggestion fits, he accepts it, at least so far. If it fails to fit-that is, if there are things it does not cover that would be called substance, and things it includes that would not be so called, he abandons it and tries again. Note that his lode star throughout is what he means by the word. However hard it may be to bring what he means to light, he assumes that he has a meaning, and in a sense that he already knows it. [...] His successive proposals are approximations to this, experiments in making the implicit explicit." (2004, pp. 371-372)

[12] See Eklund (2020, p.2069) for a deeper look at possible limitations of the objection.

Also Eklund notes that the study of ordinary uses of concepts are the prime focus of much philosophy but that we, in fact, study *our* concepts is usually left implicit (2017, p.192). Blanshard later goes on to note the problem with this approach. He writes:

> "Through all the lower-lying strata of meaning through which he may delve, the controlling end and purpose of his inquiry, is fixed by the meaning of the word. The moment he can be assured of having uncovered this, the search will be over. Is it not clear, then, that to describe the search as an inquiry into the nature of substance is a misnomer? What he is really doing is inquiring into the usage of the word." (2004, p.372)

But what we happen to mean, or how we happen to use a word, cannot itself prove the term's nature. So, this is all to make the point that even if "truth" means "corresponds with reality", that is to say, this is how the term is used, it still make sense to interrogate the merit of this truth-concept and compare it with other truth-concepts even though these are not the concepts we, in fact, use. There is no good ground for supposing that using a term as it is ordinarily used is to use them in their truthest sense (Blanshard 2004, p.377).

This traditional methodology is apparent in Vision, when he writes:

> "A natural way to express what a correspondence theorist is after is to say that she is trying to make explicit what is merely implicit in one's grasp of TRUTH." (2004, p.52)

I do not accept this as the primary role or method of philosophy since it is unclear that we (or laymen) have an unified and coherent notion implicit when using the term truth and that even if we have it, that does not suggest that this is of primary concern for our theoretical and practical purposes (Eklund 2017, p.195). Philosophers ought to provide more than simple definitions like the ones we find in lexicons (Blanshard 2004, p.377).

I will now argue that one way to see that a concept is unacceptable if it fails to meet the requirement of justified use and then that the correspondence truth-concept cannot meet this criteria and therefore cannot be accepted.

Now that concept pluralism has been explained it will make more sense what I meant with the term "unacceptable" in the argument above. I do not mean that correspondence fails to

describe what is commonly meant with the term “is true”. That a theory is unacceptable should instead be understood as the thesis that the term should not be used in the way implied by the theory.

5.2 What the Requirement of Justified Use Is

This section will deal with what the requirement of justified use is and why it is reasonable to adopt.

Placing requirements on our concepts and theories is not unusual (but it might not necessarily be framed as requirements). The charge that the correspondence theory is trivial (that it does not add anything to our understanding of truth) is an objection that should be (and usually is) taken seriously. The correct response, if your theory is trivial, seems to be either (1) modify it, (2) replace it or (3) abandon it. This objection could be phrased as the theory's failure to meet a requirement of non-triviality. I am aware that this is likely a requirement of a different sort than the one I am about to propose. The goal with inquiry in a subject is probably to gain greater understanding of the subject. That a theory that fails at this is insufficient seems almost self-evident. But it could, however, be argued that if our definition of truth is “trivial” (that nothing meaningful could be added to it) we would indeed gain greater insight into this topic if this fact was discovered.

Non-triviality could not be rephrased as a requirement if the nature of giving a definition is to add something meaningful to the term defined. It would then only mean that a trivial definition fails at being a definition at all, which means that non-triviality is not an additional requirement we place above the definition to judge it or evaluate it, it is simply a necessary part of a definition. These are not very important discussions here since my point is only to show that there are standards placed on the concepts and theories we use. A trivial definition is unacceptable since it does not meet these standards. The assumption that trivial definitions are insufficient is something most in the debate agree on.

So what is the requirement of justified use? The intuitive idea it attempts to capture is that any satisfactory concept must be usable. We should be able to use it and to have use of it. A more technical definition could be sketched as follows: for any satisfactory concept there exists (at least one) statement of the form “x is y” or “it is not the case that x is y” that can be justified. In the case of truth the x stands for a proposition and y stands for the truth predicate.

My employment of the term “justified” might lead some to conclude that I have slipped into the justification project. This is not the case. The justification project attempts to show how we can determine when propositions are likely true or not, this is not something this requirement engages with at all. The requirement does evaluate the answer to the metaphysical project and this evaluation does depend in part on the notion of justification. This in itself should not be a problem. An evaluation can, for instance, look at explanatory power but this does not mean that it has diverted from the task of evaluating the concept and instead engaging in a different question altogether. Explanatory power is likely an important feature when we evaluate concepts and theories and justification or specifically justified use is another important feature (or at least I hope to show this).

An example of the requirement in action might be illuminating. Consider the concept of stairs. It can be, roughly, defined as a set of steps leading from one height to another. It is clear that this definition clears the requirement of justified use. We can simply see if x is a set of steps leading from one height to another and therefore whether x is a stair or not. Now consider the concept gover. An object is gover if it is gold and was silver prior to being perceived. This does not meet the requirement of justified use. If we perceive an object as gold it might be evidence, it makes it more likely that it is gover but there is no possible way for us to “see” whether it was silver prior to being perceived. This notion might very well be nonsensical. I am not arguing that gover does not meet the requirement of justified use and therefore should not be accepted, though I do think this is one reasonable reason to denounce the concept, but I only mean to illustrate what type of concepts would fail to meet the requirement.

The requirement of justified use does not imply that there exists any x that is y or that there exists any x that is not y. It is ambiguous as to if that which is defined exists or not. Take the term unicorn, let us assume that we define it as a horse-like creature with a naturally growing horn from its forehead. We can determine whether an animal is a unicorn or not so the term meets the requirement yet no unicorns exist.

The requirement does not imply that we must be able to determine for any specific x whether it is y or not. It is therefore completely fine if the concept of truth cannot be applied in any specific case. Truth is therefore not limited to be constructed in a way so we can justify it. Only that the actual concept itself must have a link to justification because that insures that the concept actually can be used, this is important since if it cannot be used then it likely cannot serve any practical or theoretical purpose either.

There is an important difference between this objection and the classical version to point out. Skepticism is usually seen as problematic because we cannot have knowledge of ordinary propositions, like “I have hands” but my argument does not presuppose a specific answer to these ordinary propositions. It does not assume that “I have hands” should come out as either true or false while the classical argument assumes that the proposition “I have hands” does come out as knowledge. It can be worth keeping these points in mind as we go forward.

I am not arguing that adherence to the correspondence theory leads to someone not being able to justifiably state ordinary propositions. Even when adhering to truth as correspondence am I able to justifiably state “I am sitting on a chair” but I cannot justify “it is true that I am sitting on a chair”. This might seem strange since it is commonly assumed that in asserting “x” I am also asserting “x is true”[13]. This is mistaken. We make this mistake if we do not consider when statements like, “x is true”, are actually made (Khatchadourian 2011, p.21). “X is true” is used in certain contexts. Khatchadourian writes (2011, p.21): “that we do not normally say “ p is true” unless someone, whether in the particular context in which ‘ p is true” is uttered or in some other context being referred to, has actually asserted p or actually raised the question of its truth or falsity”. In other words, “x is true” is used when dealing with second-order questions regarding “x” (Khatchadourian 2011, p.20)[14]. Blackburn (2005, pp.58-59) makes an argument that there is no “further question”. That to analyze “it is raining” and “it is true that it is raining” is done in the same way. He says that there is nothing that gets added by “and that is true”, not even a rhetorical pat on the back. But it is unclear why we should think this. Consider someone taking a fictionalist approach to color. They would happily claim “grass is green” but to the further question, “is it true that grass is green?”, they would answer that it is strictly speaking false, “grass is green” is, at most, a useful fiction. So it seems like there is a further question and that “x” and “x is true” differ in descriptive meaning.

Do we have any reason to accept the requirement of justified use? I believe it has a strong intuitive appeal but let me attempt to make the case clearer with a thought experiment. Imagine we travel back in time and explain to David Hume that water is defined as a

[13] Both Kirkham (1994) and Blackburn (2005) seem to make this assumption.
[14] See (Khatchadourian 2011, pp.20-22) for a more in depth look at the argument and additional arguments.

substance made up of two hydrogen atoms bonded to a single oxygen atom through covalent bonds. Anything meeting this criteria is water (by definition) and anything that does not fails to be water. Hume goes on with his life with this new definition but quickly runs into some problems. He realizes he is unable to describe the predicate “is water” to any substance since there is no way for him to see if anything meets the requirement. He can certainly not be justified in saying, “the Thames is full of water”, since how could he possibly be justified in the statement “the Thames is full of a substance made up of two hydrogen atoms bonded to a single oxygen atom through covalent bonds”? One might argue that since he knows that water is H2O and that the Thames is full of water, he can know that the Thames is full of H2O but this is clearly mistaken. What he knows is that whenever something is H2O it is water and whenever something is not H2O it is not water. He therefore knows that whether the Thames is full of water or not is entirely reliant on whether the Thames is full of H2O or not, a fact he cannot possibly know or gain knowledge about. He can know that the Thames is full of H2O only if he assumes it is full of water but this is the question he investigates, assuming an answer is clearly begging the question. Note that the case might be far worse for truth as correspondence (as the next section attempts to prove) since water is H2O only fails the requirement in practice, it is possible to determine the chemical make-up of substances, it is just not possible for Hume because of the methods available to him. To determine whether a proposition correspondence with reality might in fact be impossible regardless of any possible future methods.

Is it reasonable for Hume to abandon this definition, to use a water-like concept instead which he can assess? It certainly seems like he is to me. And if this is the case, we have an example when a correct definition of a concept should be (1) modified, (2) replaced or (3) abandoned because it fails to meet the requirement of justified use. Now this is compatible with there being additional reasons for the rejection of this definition. That it failed to meet the requirement of justified use might not even be the main reason Hume would be reasonable in rejecting the definition he is provided with. But what the thought experiment shows is that failing to meet the requirement of justified use is one reasonable reason for rejecting a concept. But the reason to reject the definition cannot be that it is incorrect, water is H2O. One could of course maintain that Hume should not abandon the definition of water as H2O since it is indeed the correct definition. If he does cling to this definition he cannot any longer use the concept of water, and then what good is a definition? Is there any way to maintain that he need not abandon the definition and that he is justified in his use of the concept? The problem is that “the Thames is full of water” and “the Thames is full of H2O”

means exactly the same thing if water is defined as H2O. He cannot be committed to one of these without being committed to the other. Hume cannot commit himself to “the Thames is full of water” since he lacks any reason for committing himself to “the Thames is full of H2O”. It is difficult to see how he could maintain the definition “water is H2O” and be able to justifiably use the concept.

One potential problem is that it is not clear that the definition fails to meet the requirement of justified use. It might be possible for Hume to justifiably state, about a substance, “this is not water”. If this is the case, then we do not have an example of a definition being rejected (at least in part) because it fails to live up to the requirement. But it does not seem like he can be committed that a substance is not H2O. What properties could he possibly expect from substances made from two hydrogen atoms bonded to a single oxygen atom through covalent bonds? He has no idea about the atomic structure of any substance he comes across, so he does not know that any substance is not H2O either.

I must quickly return to the metaphysical project and the justification project to show how the requirement laid out interacts with these different projects. It might seem clear that this requirement is reasonable if we want a definition that can answer the justification project but to avoid the charge of the objection being "misplaced" the requirement must be shown to be reasonable in the context of the metaphysical project as well. This is where concept pluralism becomes important. If there are many truth-like concepts, all equally real, we must make arguments for the concept we use. This can probably be done in a great variety of ways. One argument might be that we are prima facie justified in using concepts that we do in fact have. These arguments might be difficult to produce and to judge. How to analyze this leads to many interesting meta-philosophical questions. This text cannot, however, explore these questions in any real depth. The argument I have made is that one reason to reject a concept (possibly favor another x-like concept instead) is that it can never be justifiably used. Other reasons could be that they are incoherent, incomprehensible or trivial. This certainly seems a strong enough reason for us to reject a concept, even ones we do in fact use. This is all to show that even if “x correspondence with reality” is equivalent to “x is true”, in ordinary uses, we are still justified in abandoning the theory since it cannot meet the requirements we have (and ought to have) on the concepts we use. So, this objection clearly targets the answer the correspondence theorists provide to the metaphysical project.

5.3 Why the Correspondence Theory cannot Meet the Requirement of Justified Use

Even if we accept the requirement of justified use, the further question remains, is the correspondence theory able to meet this requirement? If truth is conceived of as correspondence, can we ever justifiably state "x is true"? I think the answer is no.

To establish that truth is correspondence will reveal that "x is true" and "x correspond with reality" are logically equivalent, there is no possible way that these propositions differ in truth value. Certainly one must accept that since if an example could be produced where a proposition is true but it does not correspond with reality then the correspondence theory would be refuted. This means that anyone (that accepts the correspondence theory and is consistent) committed to "x is true" must also be committed to "x corresponds with reality". This is problematic since there exist no proposition where we can justifiably attribute it a correspondence relationship with a mind-independent reality. If this is the case, then it is clear to see that the correspondence theory cannot meet the requirement of justified use. This is because stating that a proposition is true implies that that proposition corresponds with reality, which we can never be justified in doing.

There are three different ways one might argue that we never can justify the statement that a proposition corresponds with reality[15]. The first is ontological. We cannot say that a proposition corresponds with a mind-independent reality because no such a reality exists[16]. The second deals with the nature of propositions. This objection is that propositions and "the world" are such fundamentally different entities that no meaningful correspondence relation can be formed between them[17]. The third is epistemological. There can be no way to determine whether there is actual correspondence between a proposition and "the world". It is the third objection I am interested in here. Note that this objection makes no comment whether there is a mind-independent reality or not.

So why think that we never are justified in believing that a proposition corresponds with a mind-independent reality. First, we can note, as we saw earlier in section 3, that many find this very intuitive or even obvious but this is not particularly convincing evidence that it is correct. I will here try to spell out the intuition in greater detail and make it as plausible as I can. Consider the chain between our proposition and reality. Reality exists as it is, independently from our perception of it (if we assume a realist conception of reality). We

[15] These are rarely made distinct but there are important differences between them.
[16] Idealists make arguments of these kinds.
[17] The problem of matching (Rasmussen 2014, p.54) would be an example of this type.

perceive reality, for example, get visual stimuli from it. Shapes, color and the like appear to us. This stimulus is conceptualized for us to be able to make sense of it. The brown desk is understood as separate from the white sheet of paper lying on top of it. We thus make sense of the perceptions we have. We can now formulate propositions utilizing these conceptualizations we have made. What reason do we possess to think that mind-independent reality has made it through this chain of events "unscaved", that the proposition accurately "represents" reality? We can easily imagine possible words where reality is radically different from each other but where the inhabitants, nonetheless, would end up with the same propositions as each other to describe the world.

Let us look at an example. Consider two distinct worlds, one where mereological nihilism is correct (no objects ever composes a further object) and one where compositional restrictivism (some, but not all, material objects compose further objects) is true. Let us assume that contact is the principle determining when objects compose further objects (in the second world) along the following principle: for any xs (where those xs are material objects), there is a further material object, y, composed of those xs iff the xs are in contact with one another. Would the inhabitants of these worlds (assuming everything else (that would not be logically implied by this difference) stay the same) perceive and conceptualize the world any differently? It is difficult to see why they would. Whether the atoms do not compose a chair, they are merely arranged chair-wise, or if they do compose a chair since they are in contact would result in no meaningful experiential difference to an observer. We can see that the propositions we use are "insensitive" to the way the world is. It is easy to see how similar examples can be made with regards to objects persistence through time or to ontological vagueness. These are not absurd skeptical scenarios but positions many philosophers take extremely seriously and they would affect almost all of our ordinary statements and beliefs.

Am I not making the same mistake here as the classical objection made by assuming that if truth = F, then S only knows p if S knows that p have F. This assumption is not made but instead if truth = F, then S knows that x is true, only if S knows that x is F[18]. This principle is actually rather likely. We would object to this principle only if we reject concept pluralism. To see this consider two distinct water concepts. The first is H2O, the second concerns only the taste, appearance and "functions" (like boiling at 100 degrees celsius and freezing at 0 degrees). Only if we assume that the first concept is somehow imposed would the principle imply that no one prior to the discovery of atoms and molecules could know that rain is

[18] See Marian (2025, Section 9.2) for criticism of this assumption.

water. Those employing the second water-like concept can know the Thames is full of water without knowing anything of its chemical make-up. If all through history used our water concept (if it indeed is water = H2O) would the principle yield rather unintuitive results but they likely employed a different water-like concept then us. It is not even particularly difficult to imagine that these concepts would have different coextensions. If we discover a substance that we experience, in all relevant aspects, as water but it does have an additional atom bonded to the molecule (but which seems to not affect the property of the molecule) we would (likely) classify it as not water but simply water-like but the users of the second water-like concept would indeed classify it as water. Assuming that people throughout history belong to the same speech-community (or that they use the same concepts) as us seem to be the reason the principle gets these weird and unintuitive results. If truth is correspondence with reality then "S knows that p is true" and "S knows that p corresponds with reality" are much the same in meaning and would require the same justification.

Let me quickly summarize the argument I have made. In addition to our truth-concept there exist many other, equally real truth-like concepts. One way to see if a truth-like concept is acceptable is to examine if it can be justifiably used. For a concept to be justifiably useable we must, at least theoretically, be able to use the predicate or its negation in regards to an appropriate object, that is to say we must be able to justify "x (proposition) is y (true) or it is not the case that x is y".

If we cannot judge whether a proposition corresponds with reality, then I cannot justifiably say "x corresponds with reality". If truth is correspondence, the statement "x is true" logically equivalent with "x correspondence with reality" (it is never the case that these propositions differ in truth value). My commitment to one implies my commitment to the other. I am therefore no more justified in saying "x is true" than "x corresponds with reality" but I am never justified in saying "x corresponds with reality", I am therefore never justified in saying "x is true". Since acceptable concepts require us to justifiably use them, the correspondence theory of truth is unacceptable.

What consequences, if any, does this argument have on the correspondence theory of truth. It seems like the correspondence theorists have two possible choices if the argument is successful. They could abandon either correspondence as the definition of truth or abandon metaphysical realism (they could of course also abandon both theses but they do not have to). Some truth theories commonly accepted by those that advance the comparison objection are

coherentism and pragmatism. There are also examples of correspondence theorists that abandon metaphysical realism in favor of idealism or relativism. These are all ways to avoid the objection I have made. This text does not argue for any of these options, only that is impossible to maintain both correspondence as truth and metaphysical realism. They are, in other words, incompatible.

6. Counter-Arguments

Hopefully it has become clear how this argument avoids the "misplaced" objection but there are many more possible objections we should take a look at. I think there are four main avenues to attack the argument, (1) deny concept pluralism, (2) provide faults with the requirement of justifiable use, (3) argue that correspondence in fact does meet the requirement and (4) bring up problematic implications of the argument. Let us consider each objection in turn.

6.1 Concept Pluralism

If it can be shown that concept pluralism is false or that concept pluralism in regards to truth is incoherent, then much of the force of my argument will be lost. If this is the case the argument is "misplaced", we are concerned with truth, plain and simple, and it does make much less sense to place requirements on the concepts we use, these are after all the concepts that there are. Without relying on concept pluralism it is also difficult to see how the assumption that if truth = F, then S knows that x is true, only if S knows that x is F, is justified. If this principle is unjustified the argument fails since it seems to rely on this assumption.

I will not devote much time to arguments against this thesis, focusing instead on arguments targeting the objection in a more direct way but wanted to note that the objection is vulnerable to arguments against concept pluralism.

Another, adjacent argument, is that special weight should be given to the concepts that we actually use. This argument can be made even by those that accept concept pluralism. Now this argument is, as mentioned, not incompatible with that some requirements can make

concepts unacceptable, even concepts that we do in fact use. A stronger version (that is incompatible with my argument) is that concepts we do in fact use are to be accepted no matter their practical and theoretical value. This does seem too strong and rather implausible. Why should we accept those concepts only because they are the concepts we happen to use? The weaker thesis can provide reason to suspect my argumentation but cannot on its own disprove it. I have no issue assuming that concepts we use are prima facie justified.

6.2 The Requirement of Justified Use

Even if concept pluralism is accepted and we accept the thesis that different concepts can be valued based on their theoretical virtues we can still find faults with the requirement of justified use. You can reasonably think that it is a theoretical virtue if a concept can meet the requirement of justified use but that other theoretical virtues can "compensate" if a concept fails to do this. For example, if a concept does not meet the requirement of justified use but it has great explanatory or predictive power it is likely an acceptable concept. My main problem with this approach is that it is difficult to see just how a concept can have these theoretical virtues without also meeting the requirements I have laid forth. But assuming that this can be done it becomes clear that my argument is too strong. So it might be best to make it a bit weaker.

Let me attempt to modify my argument to take this objection into consideration.

1. A theory not meeting the requirement of justified use is unacceptable unless it possesses other (outweighing) theoretical virtues.
2. The correspondence theory does not meet the requirement of justified use.
   Therefore:
3. The correspondence theory is unacceptable unless it possesses other (outweighing) theoretical virtues.

If we accept this version of the argument it is clear that the work is not done in proving that the correspondence theory is unacceptable. The next step would be to show that the correspondence theory does not possess theoretical virtues that outweigh the requirement of justified use. I would argue that this argument still provides a strong reason to reject the correspondence theory of truth since it seems quite likely that it does not possess particularly

strong theoretical virtues, for example is it unclear to see how it could be used to predict anything. But this would need to be further argued.

However, I also strongly suspect that the requirement of justified use is needed to be met by a concept for it to be able to possess these further theoretical virtues. To attempt to prove this is far too big of an undertaking to be done here but let me give a short explanation as to why I find this likely. Take gravity as an example. It is clear that the concept of gravity is used in theories with great explanatory and predictive power. But if our understanding of gravity did not allow us to ever justifiably use it, it cannot either be used in these theories and thus it will be useless to us from a theoretical point of view.

So to finish, it can be said that my argument should take this weaker form but this argument is also likely problematic for the correspondence theory of truth. It is also not clear that this weaker form is needed, it depends on if justified use is a prerequisite for further theoretical virtues.

6.3 Correspondence is Usable

The correspondence theorist might take issue with my second premise, which states "the correspondence theory does not meet the requirement of justified use". There exist two main ways to argue against this premise. The first is to argue that we can in fact justifiably state that a proposition corresponds with reality. The second is to argue that even if we cannot do this, there is no need. We can justifiably state "x" or "x is true" and that this is all that is needed for the theory to meet the requirement.

The first option seems rather difficult. Even authors not persuaded by the classical comparison objection usually accept that we cannot assess whether a proposition corresponds with reality. McDermid writes: "the comparison objection is right at least to this extent: we cannot step outside of our language and conceptual scheme and compare our beliefs to the facts to see if they fit" (1998, p.810).

The second option does seem more promising. It is correct that we can justifiably state "x" even if we use a correspondence conception of truth but this does not meet the requirement. We must be able to use the concept we are trying to define therefore, we must be able to use "x is true (or not true)" and not just "x". If you hold the view that it is enough that we can state "x" you are arguing against the requirement of justified use and not that correspondence actually is able to meet it. The requirement is meant to be used on all concepts and this line of

argument makes an arbitrary exception to the concept of truth. It can also be argued that even if we cannot ever justifiably assert whether a proposition corresponds with reality or not can we still make justified claims regarding propositions truth value and if this is the case truth as correspondence does meet the requirement. As I already have mentioned, is it difficult to see how this can be the case if "truth" means "correspond with reality". But Marian (2018, p.241) writes: "most correspondence theorists consider it implausibly and unnecessarily bold to maintain that 'true' *means the same as* 'corresponds with a fact'". This does not help too much. The problem is not that "true" and "corresponds with reality" means the same thing but that they are logically equivalent. To be committed to "x is true" is also to be committed to "x corresponds with reality". This will always be the case for the correspondence theorist since truth and correspondence with reality can never, by definition, be separate. So, if we cannot commit ourselves to "x correspondence with reality" we cannot commit ourselves to "x is true" since it would logically require us to make the first, unacceptable, commitment.

It seems like the correspondence theory thus does not meet the requirement of justified use.

6.4 Implications

I see two main arguments from the possible implication of the objection I made. The first is that no truth-like concept can meet this requirement, for example McDermid (1998, pp. 809-810) argues that the objection easily can be modified to target coherentist theorists as well. The second is that this argument forces us to abandon metaphysical realism.

Whether any other theory of truth can meet the requirement that I have laid out is an open question. Let us look at coherentism for example. It is much easier to see how we could compare a belief with a set of other beliefs and see if they are coherent then it is to see how we can compare a belief with "reality" to see if they correspond. But leaving this to one side, this is not a text arguing for a specific conception of truth and I have not here committed to any other theory. It is possible (although, I think, unlikely) that no theory of truth we have developed is satisfactory. I would, however, remain consistent and insist that a new theory of truth would then be needed. That other theories of truth also fail this requirement would be an argument against those theories, not an argument against the requirement itself.

The second objection is that this kind of argument entails relativism. Why would we believe that relativism is an entailment of my argument? It is clear that my argument ties truth

to justification in an important sense. This can lead to truth shifting according to what is justified, and truth would then be different depending on perspective because what is justified can likely shift depending on perspective. As we noted previously, when discussing whether the classical argument entails skepticism, this type of argument is a non-sequter. Independent argumentation must be provided to the effect that relativism is false. But even assuming this can be done, for example if the infinite regress argument against relativism is successful, this would not provide any reason for rejecting the argument I have made since the objection does not entail relativism. That my argument entails relativism seems to be confused to what link my argument implies exists between truth and justification. It does indeed make truth and justification inseparable in some sense but it never makes truth require justification. If the universe has an odd or even amount of stars is not ruled out as a potential truth by the requirement I have placed on a satisfactory definition of truth even though we certainly cannot justify one answer over another. The requirement does not imply that it is meaningless to discuss whether x is true or not regardless of justification but only that our notion of truth cannot be placed wholly outside of justification completely. There exists no link between individual truth and our ability to justify them but only that concepts themselves need to be evaluated by the possibility of justified use. The requirement states that unicorn must be defined in such a way so the concept can, in some cases (at least theoretical), be used but this does not imply any relativism regarding if something is a unicorn or not. The same point can be made to the concept of truth.

It is also worth noting that neither does concept pluralism regarding truth imply relativism. It is objectively the case that it is true to believe x. But it is also, equally, objectively the case that it is true* to believe z (Eklund 2017, p.27). What is objectively true or true* is what determines what we ought to believe.

7. Conclusion

We have looked at how the comparison objections have usually looked and seen that it has some big problems. One of the most notable was that the objection is "misplaced", it deals with the justification project when the correspondence theorists are interested in the metaphysical project and the objection does not show how the two projects can be linked in such a way that their objection is of any concern for the correspondence theorist. We then saw how pragmatists have used the objection, arguably how they managed to strengthen it but I

argued that their methodology cannot be accepted and that their version of the comparison objection also failed. I have tried to formulate a version of the objection that keeps the strength of the pragmatist version without relying on their more implausible principles. My argument tries to establish a requirement of justified use on acceptable concepts and then tries to provide reasons for suspecting that truth as correspondence does not manage to meet this requirement. If acceptable concepts do need to meet this requirement and if the correspondence theory does not manage to do this then it is unacceptable. We then examined some possible counter-arguments against my objection. I think I showed that it is unlikely that the correspondence theorist can answer the objection in a satisfactory way but more work certainly would need to be done to establish concept pluralism, a thesis assumed in this text and without it my argument would likely fail, becoming, like the classical version, "misplaced". My main goal has been to show a way for the comparison objection to avoid the charge of being "misplaced" and hopefully it has become clear one possible way it can be done. I finished my argumentation with concluding that either the correspondence theory ought to be replaced with a different truth-like concept or it must abandon metaphysical realism to be able to preserve the theory.

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