

Page 4: Basics of Truth

Critical thinkers want to know what is true. That's the whole point of reasoning. In this section you will learn what the word "truth" means, what knowledge is and how it differs from opinion. You will also learn how to properly categorize sentences so you can know how to evaluate them.

A. Properties of claims.

Every claim has four attributes, the first three of which must be determined before reasoning. The fourth attribute is determined by reasoning.

Descriptive or Prescriptive claims

Descriptive claims tell how the world is, was, or will be.

Example: "Bob is friendly." This sentence describes how the world (Bob being part of the world) is.

Example: "Texas was once a sovereign nation." This sentence describes how the world used to be.

Prescriptive claims tell how the world should be. (This includes all possible time.)

Example: "You should take your doctor's advice."

Example: "Abortion should remain legal."

Should means, "There is an overriding reason to..." In the first example, the person is recommending that given all possible choices, there is a reason which is so strong and so compelling, that all other options must be abandoned in favor of following the doctor's advice.

IMPORTANT Related term: **Normative**

Normative claims are a subset of prescriptive claims which deal with values and morality. The second example, "Abortion should remain legal" is a normative claim.

Objective or Subjective claims

Objective claims have a truth value which is the same for you, for me, and for others. In other words, if a claim is true, then it is true for everybody in the world and if it is false, then it is false for everybody in the world.

Example: "Milwaukee is in Wisconsin." Whether a person knows that this is true or not, or whether they believe it or not, the claim actually is true for everyone.

Example: "Slavery is wrong." If this claim is true, then it is true for everybody. One's agreement with the claim is irrelevant. Whether one owns a slave or is a slave or lived in the antebellum south is irrelevant. The truth value is the same for everyone.

Example: "Abortion is wrong." The nature of this claim is exactly like the one above.

Only the noun is changed. People disagree about the truth of the claim, but the claim is objective. That's why people argue about it. If they agree with the claim, then they are saying, "This claim is true for everyone, even those who disagree with me." Those who disagree with the claim are saying, "This claim is false, even for those who disagree with me." Both of these examples have to do with human beings who are the same everywhere, always and forever. This demonstrates that most moral claims about humans are objective.

Subjective claims are claims where the truth of the claim can reasonably differ for you, for me, and for others.

The important thing to keep in mind is that we're talking about the actual truth, not just one's belief. Subjective claims generally deal with preference and taste. These are matters that are not worth arguing about, because they affect only the individual and no one else.

Example: "I prefer women with lots of tattoos." Notice that there is no logical conflict with another person making the opposite claim.

Example: "My favorite football team is the Packers." It is neither right nor wrong to have the Packers as a favorite team. Also notice that there is nothing logically contradictory about another person saying, "My favorite team is the Saints."

Absolute or Relative claims

Absolute claims are invariant always and forever. In other words, if the truth of the claim can (practically speaking) never change with circumstances of time or place, then it is considered absolute.

Example: "Milwaukee is in Wisconsin." We've already determined that this claim is objective. (By the way, it's also descriptive.) It is also absolute, because cities don't change location. They pretty much stay put. So the claim "Milwaukee is in Wisconsin" was true 100 years ago, it was true one week ago, it is true today, and it will be true 100 years from today.

Example: "Slavery is wrong." Most Americans now agree that this claim is true, though slavery is still practiced in such places as China and the Sudan. It is wrong because it unfairly treats humans as property. It was just as wrong when it was practiced in the United States and it is wrong for the Chinese and the Sudanese to practice it too. The reason is that people are always the same regardless of where they live or when they live.

Relative claims are claims where the truth can change with circumstances of time and place. In other words, a claim that is true now, might be false later on.

Example: "Joe is in Milwaukee Wisconsin." People don't stay in one place like cities do. Joe might get on a plane and fly to San Francisco, in which the words "Joe is in Milwaukee Wisconsin" would become false.

Example: "It is autumn." Utter these words every four months. One of those times the claim will be true, the other three, it will be false.

True or False

Every claim is either true or false. It doesn't matter if you agree with a claim and it doesn't matter if you know whether it's true or false. It also doesn't matter if other people disagree about the claim.

Truth: A claim is true when it corresponds with reality. "Reality" covers not only the material world, but also the metaphysical, moral, and ideological world. Take for instance "justice." You can't go out to the store and get one, but "justice" is still real. We can make claims that are true about justice. For instance, if an innocent man goes to jail for a crime he didn't commit, while the real criminal got away, we can truthfully say, "Justice wasn't done."

It isn't always easy to see whether the claim is true or false. That's what we're trying to discover when we reason. Before we reason we know one thing for sure; the claim that we're reasoning about IS true or false. Not both. Not neither.

Related Concept: **Matters of Opinion and Matters of Fact**

If something is a "**matter of opinion**," then it is a subjective issue. In these cases, what "matters" is the opinion and nothing else.

If something is a "**matter of fact**," then it is an objective issue. In these cases, what "matters" is the fact.

Why people get confused.

People often think that if something is controversial or if the answer is unknown, then this falls into the category of "matter of opinion." This is incorrect.

People can have opinions about matters of fact.

Example: "It is my opinion that there is nothing wrong with having an abortion."

This is an opinion about a matter of fact. Either there is something wrong with it or there is not. It is not a matter of personal preference as is one's preference for ice cream.

Example: "It is my opinion that people live on other planets."

This is an opinion about a matter of fact. Either people do live on other planets or they don't. This is not a matter of personal preference, even though no one knows the answer.

B. The Three Laws of Logic

1. Law of Identity: If a claim is true, then it is true.
2. Law of the Excluded Middle: Every claim is either true or false.
3. Law of Non-Contradiction: No claim can be true and false at the same time.

C. Bringing these concepts together.

It is essential that you understand that EVERY claim has exactly one attribute from EACH of the four categories discussed. For instance, the claim "Milwaukee is in Wisconsin" is

DESCRIPTIVE, OBJECTIVE, ABSOLUTE, and TRUE.

Helpful tips:

1) If a claim is subjective, then it is automatically relative.

2) If a claim is absolute, then it is objective.

Caution, it does not work the other way around. In other words, one cannot assume that because a claim is relative, that it is subjective or that if a claim is objective, that it is absolute.

3) No claims are subjective and absolute.

Knowledge and Belief

D. Knowledge

1. Knowledge is an idea which you have which matches external reality. In other words, the idea is correct (or true).

2. There is no such thing as "false knowledge."

This is an incorrect use of the word "knowledge," because the belief that the earth was flat was incorrect. Even though they thought they had knowledge, they were mistaken.

3. Three criteria for knowing.

a. You must have the correct answer.

b. You must be fully aware that it is the correct answer.

c. You must be able to explain the correct answer to someone else.

4. Active and Passive Knowing

a. Active: Direct experience, testing, proving, or by reasoning.

Advantages: Direct and personal. Errors due to miscommunication by others is eliminated.

Disadvantage: Even direct experiences can be misunderstood.

b. Passive: When we are told by someone else.

Most learning happens this way. Classroom, TV, news reports, papers, magazines, etc.

Advantages: Saves time. One can learn about things from the past and from other places.

Disadvantage: We are conditioned to accept it uncritically, and much of what we hear is little more than hearsay or rumor.

E. Belief and Opinion (For our purposes we can consider these words as synonyms.)

1. The attitude of holding a proposition p to be true where there is some degree of evidence, though not conclusive evidence, for the truth of p .

a. Stronger than ungrounded opinion, but weaker than full knowledge.

b. Knowing is considered to entail that p actually is true, while believing p is consistent with the possibility that p is false.

2. People act in accordance with their beliefs.

a. It would be inconsistent to worship God while claiming to believe that there is no God.

3. Not all opinions are equal.

a. Mere opinions are completely unsupported.

b. Reasoned opinions have evidence to support them.

4. Faith

a. Faith is the same as "reasoned opinion," but with two added features - faith requires trust and action.

b. Blind faith is the same as "mere opinion."

There is a popular, but mistaken belief that faith is always unsupported.

c. Furthermore, faith is not necessarily associated with religion. For instance, an employer has faith in their employees.

d. Example: A person who drives 20 minutes to work and does not leave their house two hours early (the time it takes to walk) has faith in their automobile. They have a reasonable belief that the car will start and get them to work without breaking down. It's easy to see that they trust their car and they act in accordance with that trust.

F. Information

1. Data, Facts. Information precedes knowledge. Information may or may not be organized. One must have information in order to gain knowledge.

2. Example: A book which you have not read.

3. Information can be correct (true) or incorrect (false).

4. While some dictionaries say that information is knowledge, information is less than knowledge. Even when one is aware of information, there is something less understood about information