

What use the Realist for a Theory of Truth?

Corey Dethier
corey.dethier@gmail.com
Clemson University

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The question

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Yes. Specifically, she should say that truth is *criteria transcendent*: success according to our criteria for recognizing truth is not sufficient for truth. And this, it turns out, is incompatible with Chang's account.

The plan

First, a quick primer on truth.

Second, what the realist – and everyone else – should want from an account of truth: criteria transcendence.

Third, how criteria transcendence rules out Chang's account and potential responses on his behalf.

Finally, some remarks on what realism ought to mean.

A quick primer on truth

Theories of truth

Following Soames ([1984](#)), we find two main kinds of “theories of truth” in the literature:

- (1) Theories of the semantics of “true” and its cognates.
- (2) Theories of the metaphysics of truths.

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Claim: the realist’s concern is (at most) with (2).

Redundant uses of “true”

Since the work of Ramsey (1927), it's been clear that some uses of “is true” are (semantically) redundant. For example:

“It's true that it will rain tomorrow.” has the same content as “It will rain tomorrow.”

“Is it true that it will rain tomorrow?” has the same content as “Will it rain tomorrow?”

“Please let it be true that it rains tomorrow.” has the same content as “Please let it rain tomorrow.”

Non-redundant uses of “true”

Other examples are not redundant:

“What John said is true.” does not have the same content as “What John said.”

“Is what John said true?” does not the same content as “What John said?”

“Please let what John said be true.” does not the same content as “Please let what John said.”

The semantic role of “true”

The predicate “true” acts as a device of *semantic descent*, allowing “descriptions or names” of statements to stand in “for the statements themselves” (Azzouni [2018](#)).

Notice: we have said *nothing* yet about metaphysics. The semantic role of “true” doesn’t tell us anything about what distinguishes true sentences from false ones.

Semantics is irrelevant to the realist (qua realist)

The semantic picture is entirely compatible with both realism and anti-realism.

It's also compatible with Chang's particular brand of Kantianism: both quoted sentences in

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can be “mind-framed.”

So if any kind of theory of truth is relevant here, it must be one that affects the epistemology or metaphysics.

Criteria Transcendence

What should a realist want from a theory of truth?

Criteria transcendence: success according to our criteria for recognizing truth is not sufficient for truth.

It should always be *possible* for us to think we've found the truth but be wrong.

An idea with many names

I'm borrowing "criteria transcendence" from Azzouni ([2000](#)).

Putnam ([1977](#)): for a realist, truth is "radically non-epistemic."

Dummett ([1991](#)): truth is "recognition transcendent."

Button ([2013](#)): "Even an ideal theory might be radically false."

Maudlin ([2015](#)): "operationally ideal, but still false."

You might think ...

Chang (2022, 85): “just the opposite of what many scientific realists seek.”

But this confuses our criteria being *indicators* of the truth with them being *constitutive* of the truth (cf. Chang 2022, 170, 180).

The realist wants the former but not the latter.

Why not?

Because truth isn't *up to us* in that way.

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Compare the *fiat theory of truth*:



The sovereign's words are
constitutive of the truth.

Generalizing

According to the realist, the problem with the fiat theory is that it violates criteria transcendence: it treats a criterion for recognizing truth as constitutive of the truth.

Because the realist thinks that truth isn't "up to us," she has good reason to endorse criteria transcendence.

So does everyone else

- (P1) Our criteria for recognizing truths ultimately are nothing “over and above” everyday activities of measurement, experiment, observation, etc.
 - (P2) Truth transcends these everyday activities: we can think we've performed them successfully and still get the wrong answer.
- ∴ (C) Truth transcends our criteria for recognizing it.

Against (P1)?

Perhaps there is some sense in which our criteria for recognizing truths go beyond these everyday activities?

E.g., there's something about productively fitting into a whole system of practice that goes above and beyond the measurements (etc.) that contribute to said "fitting in."

Chang on (James on) reifying truth

“it would be a category-mistake to say that positive test-outcomes are *caused* by the theory’s truth. James warned against the reification of truth as with other ‘words in *th*’ (wealth, health, strength and truth), quoting an epigram from Lessing: ‘How come it’s exactly the richest people in the world who have the most money?’ There is, of course, nothing to explain here, because having lots of money is exactly what being wealthy *means* (James 1907 [1975], 105–6). So it is, too, with truth-as-operational-coherence. Here again I am rejecting the relation between empirical success and truth envisaged in standard scientific realism, according to which truth explains success.” (Chang 2022, 182)

Reifying truth

The opposition to (P1) just sketched would commit us to precisely this reification of truth, for there is nothing we *do* that goes beyond the everyday methods.

There's no way for "fitting into a whole system of practice" to be influenced by the world except by these methods.

Against (P2)?

Biting the bullet: when you measure twice and get two different results, both are (always!) true or have some degree of truth.

In favor of (P2)

What needs to be accounted for here is not just linguistic usage, but why we (e.g.) “measure twice, cut once.”

Perhaps the opponent of (P2) can tell a story about projection or generalization here.

But then what is the disagreement here beyond the use of the word “true”? (cf. Stein [1989](#))

Criteria transcendence: it's not just for realists!

Nothing in this argument depends on the assumption of realism.

All that we require is that we use “true” in the everyday sense that our everyday practices can yield untrue results.

So: whether you're a realist or not, so long as you think that we *can* make mistakes, you should want criteria transcendence.

Chang's "truth-as-operational-coherence"

Operational coherence

“What is *operationally* coherent is what makes sense for us to do, and ‘sense’ here is framed by our aims. ... Coherence is *design* for success, and that design is based on empirical learning: it makes *sense* to do what we think will succeed, and it doesn’t make sense to do what we think is unlikely to succeed. Coherent activities are carefully designed so that they *would* work.” (Chang [2022](#), 44)

We can't be wrong about operational coherence

“Truth-by-operational-coherence is something achievable and verifiable in practice” (Chang [2022](#), 200).

It “can actually be tracked” (Chang [2022](#), 250).

Operational coherence is *luminous*: if we think we have it, we do (Chang [2022](#), 182–194)

The centrality of luminosity

Luminosity is the centerpiece of Chang's argument for why we should prefer his pragmatic account of truth.

Other kinds of truth are impossible to pursue because we do not have "criteria of judgment" (Chang [2022](#), 217) for distinguishing them from falsehood (Chang [2022](#), 198, 250).

Absent such criteria, no way of aiming at truth (Chang [2022](#), 2).

The problem

If truth is luminous, it is not criteria transcendent: if a claim meets our criteria for recognizing truth, it cannot be false.

Same problem as the fiat theory: on Chang's account, truth is *constituted* by how a claim fits into a human practice.

So: the realist (and everyone else) should reject Chang's account of truth as operational-coherence.

Rejoinder 1: truth as a quality

For Chang ([2022](#), 186–87), truth is not an all-or-nothing thing; instead, it is “multi-faceted and contextual *quality*.”

This obviously doesn't help: either our practices are constitutive of this quality or they are not.

If they are: then we don't get criteria transcendence.

If they aren't: there's no reason to prefer Chang's account.

Rejoinder 2: operational coherence is hard

For Chang ([2022](#), 189–90), it is not easy to achieve operational coherence (and thus truth).

This doesn't help either: at best it indicates that the operational coherence is a good indicator of the truth.

Rejoinder 3: an in-principle difference?

“Russell says: ‘it is so often harder to determine whether a belief is useful than whether it is true’ (Russell 1910, p. 138, see also p. 135). This objection draws a false equivalence between the in-principle inaccessibility of the correspondence between idea and world, and the detailed vagueness and multi-dimensionality of very tangible successes.” (Chang 2022, 203)

Rejoinder 3: an in-principle difference?

Realist accounts of truth: truth is a relation between our ideas and the noumena, and thus in-principle inaccessible.

Chang: truth is a relation between our ideas and the phenomena, so fallible (in some sense), but not in-principle inaccessible.

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Chang: truth is a relation between our ideas and the phenomena, so fallible (in some sense), but not in-principle inaccessible.

But even if truth is “all about phenomena,” that’s not an argument for operational coherence being *constitutive* of truth.

Rejoinder 4: I'm being uncharitable

Perhaps I'm over-inflating Chang's claim that we're able to tell when we've hit on the truth.

But if we deflate this notion, then it's not clear why other accounts of truth can't appeal to it as well.

Redux

To accommodate criteria transcendence without giving up on the argument for his position, Chang needs:

- (1) There's some sense in which truth-as-operational-coherence is criteria transcendent.
- (2) There's is some (distinct) sense in which truth-as-operational-coherence is criteria immanent.
- (3) Other accounts of truth render it criteria transcendent in both senses.

It's hard to see how to motivate (2) without undercutting (3).

Realism as epistemology

Where does Chang go wrong?

He can't be bothered to take his opponents seriously.

One result is that he centers metaphysics and truth in his characterization of realism, ignoring 40 (50?) years of realist writings that center epistemology.

What is realism?

“Scientific realism is a positive epistemic attitude toward the content of our best theories and models, recommending belief in both observable and unobservable aspects of the world described by the sciences.” (Chakravartty [2017](#))

Realism as epistemology first

I am a realist because I hold that the methods of the sciences provide us with the best means of answering empirical questions, regardless of whether those questions concern observables or unobservables.

Stark, raving realism

One can be more of a realist.

But I don't really see how one could be more of a realist in the epistemological dimension laid out by Chakravartty.

Epistemology-first realism is “stark, raving” realism Railton ([1986](#)).

Thank you!

Thank you!

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