

Pragmatism's Theory of Truth in the Eyes of Counseling : Study Notes

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プラグマティズムにおける「真理」の概念とカウンセリングの視点 — 研究ノート

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Abstract

This is an author's study note on pragmatism: how the concept of truth was thought and described in pragmatism. For this, the author has chosen the concept of truth appeared in the "Pragmatism and Other Essays" by William James. The concept was functional and hence, thought to be applicable in the practice of counseling. Then, studied was the definition of "practical" whether it was similar to that of Charles Peirce's. Bertrand Russell was also cited in order to examine James's view of truth. The author's note continued to apply the pragmatism's truth into counseling. One of the results was that the truth was a go-between because it married the tender-minded to the tough-minded so as to harmonize empiricist ways of thinking with the more religious demands of human beings.

Key words: Pragmatism, truth, practical, counseling

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抄 録

小稿はプラグマティズム、とくにその“真理・truth”についての概念を、研究ノートにしたものである。テキストとしてはウィリアム・ジェームズの「プラグマティズムと他のエッセイ (Pragmatism and Other Essays)」Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1963を用いた。そして、“真理”や“プラクティカル”の語義をひもとき、ピーヤスやラッセルの批判を紹介した。また、著者の専門であるカウンセリングとの関わりを臨床場面の事例をあげて考察した。

キーワード：プラグマティズム、真理、実践、カウンセリング

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When reading "Pragmatism and other essays" by James (1963), I thought that the concept of truth in pragmatism would be applicable in counseling practice. Therefore, in this paper, I introduce James' theory and its background, especially its functional concept, then I discuss how it can work in counseling sessions.

These are my study notes to enhance my understanding of counseling.

Pragmatism's theory of truth is originally proposed by Charles S. Peirce in 1878 (James, 1963): "...there is no distinction of meaning so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference of " practice (P. 23)." This definition was an attempt to clarify truth as it shows up in the practice of inquiry.

William James (1963) reworked Peirce's view. First, James thought that by "practical" he meant "the distinctively concrete, the individual, the particular and effective as opposed to the abstract, general and inert (P. 23)." Thus, James approached truth from a physiological and/or psychological perspective rather than a specifically philosophical view point. In fact, this James' perspective went to the point where truth and usefulness become completely fused. For instance, suppose there is a sentence starting that Americans are practical. We can not call it true until we have proved it for ourselves in our future experiences and become aware that it is meaningful to believe so. In other words, this statement can not be called

true at the moment when it is made. According to James, "truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made by events (P. 89)" in a process of discovery. James brought pragmatic meaning into harmony with his view of truth and concluded by stating, "the truth is only the expedient in our way of thinking, just as the right is only the expedient in the way of our behaving (P. 98)".

Thus James' conclusion seems adequate and it is the point I admire most about James because it is a functional way of thinking that works in the field of counseling which I am interested in. I will come back later to talk about it how it is adequate and helpful by illustrating my experiences in counselor-client relationship.

James' view of truth, however, was criticized by Bertrand Russell (James, 1963) and others. Russell objected to James' view of truth and used the following sentences to illustrate: (1) "It is true that other people exist," and (2) "It is useful to believe that other people exist." If James were right, Russell argued, "(1) and (2) would have the same meaning and would express one and the same proposition." Russell continued to claim that "when I believe one, I believe the other. Hence, there should be no transition in the mind from one to the other. But it is obvious that there is a transition, thus these sentences do not have the same meaning."

Moreover, Russell criticized James' view of truth because it is so difficult to apply that it is practically useless.

It seems to me that a functional way of interpretation is very important. Hence, it is a key to understanding James' view of truth, and Russell seems to fail to do so. Then, what is the functional way of interpretation of James' view? By "functional" I mean the interpretation that asks "how" James' view works instead of "what" James' view is. James himself once quoted in his "Principles of Psychology" (1890, p. 279) that we can hardly expect to get a proper answer if we ask "what" the stream of a river is. An answer to this question might be something like " $H^2O + \alpha$," but it is not an adequate answer if you want to know about the stream of a river. Likewise if you ask a question about "what" life is, you are hardly satisfied with probable answers. On the other hand, if you ask "how" life is or "how" the stream of a river is, you at least get an idea through which you can continue to pursue your interests. This functional way of thinking is practical and adequate, it seems to me, and is certainly a key to understanding James' view of truth. It is with the functional way of thinking that the sentences (1) and (2) used as examples, as opposed to Russell's view, become one and have the same meaning.

Let me take my experience with those who were very obsessive as example. Once

I worked as my in-training program with a therapist in a counseling session in which an obsessive person was our client. The client was very obsessive because he felt as if the ceiling in any room which he entered would fall down on him at any moment. According to a common judgment most people tend to make, the client's appeal seems not true. It is unlikely to happen because the building itself is made by concrete and from a point of modern architecture it is rare that a ceiling falls down unless extraordinary disaster such as a strong earthquake has occurred. Anyway, the ceiling in the counseling room where we were did not seem to fall down on us. Therefore, we could say to the client, for instance, that he had the wrong idea and explained to him how safely it was made by telling all kinds of facts available to us. But we did not say this. Instead, we tried to listen what the client meant by the ceiling was falling down on him, and how he was feeling then. The therapist frequently restated what the client had said and clarified the client's feelings (Rogers, 1961). I do not think I have to tell about all details of the counseling processes with the client, but what I want to emphasize here is that regardless of how false it was, we tried to understand empathetically how the client was perceiving things including his feelings. For us, it was not important whether or not the client's idea was true. Rather we felt that it was up to the client's perception. Therefore, we accepted it as it was accepted by the client.

Then, the client seemed to begin to realize that we were not enemies, rather, we were friendly and empathetic to him. Every word he spoke was understood by us as it was. We did not analyze it, nor make judgment on it. The client's fear and obsessive/compulsive feelings seemed to begin to diminish (Rogers, 1954). This is just a brief illustration of what I have experienced, but my point is that a functional or pragmatic interpretation of truth was the most helpful and important thing for the therapists to understand the client. Because of this, the client seemed to become able to overcome his obsessive feelings, and possibly it is in this context that (1) and (2) become one and have the same meaning to the person, such as the client I have mentioned above, because (1) should be perceived true only when (2) is believed.

Now, the example I have just mentioned could also be a good indication as to how the dilemma between rationalism and empiricism has been solved by the pragmatism's theory of truth. If the tender-minded were to deal with such a person as the client in my example, he might say to the person something like following: "Believe me. I am a therapist. Do what I tell you to do, then, you shall be cured," "believe God who is almighty, then, you shall be saved," or "you are ill because you have hallucinations, and your hallucinations come from your mind." These are very directive and suggestive, or intellectualistic, idealistic, religious, optimis-

tic, and dogmatic in philosophical terms. Most often the counseling is likely to be unsuccessful. On the other hand, if the tough-minded were to deal with the above person, he might say: "the ceiling is unlikely to fall down because the building is made out of concrete, and from an architectural point it is almost impossible;" "I can show you the facts that tell you why the ceiling is unlikely to fall down;" "it is rather you that deviate things." "are you sure that you feel the ceiling is falling down on you?" or "it is rather hard to say according to the previous data that the illness such as the one you have now is totally curable." Materialistic, pessimistic, or skeptical are the best words to describe the view the tough-minded tend to have. In this case also, the counseling is unlikely to be successful.

Here, the dilemma between the tender-minded and the tough-minded seem to lie in the extremes which have little to do with what is going on in the person. Both these types of therapists, if they were therapists, tend to press only their own temperaments on the person. What is most important here is the therapists' temperaments. It seems to me that one of the most serious reasons why a counseling is unlikely to be successful in most cases is that it lacks awareness of the client's feelings, or what is going on in the client, on the part of the therapist. If the therapist is able to become aware of what is going on in the client from the client's frame of

reference (Rogers, 1959), that is, what has been true to the client, then, the therapist is very helpful in letting the client find what is meaningful, useful, or satisfactory to the client himself. This seems to lead to a functional and practical cure for the client. In other words, the counseling will not be successful unless the client becomes able to accept what has been true to him, and find meaning in the course of the counseling. Here, the unconditional and positive regard (Rogers, 1957) of the client's temperament, which is neither the tender-minded's view nor the tough-minded's view, takes a main role on the part of the counselor.

The above is just an example of how the dilemma has been solved by the treatment of the functional or pragmatic theory of truth. It is obvious that the theory of truth is a go-between because it marries the tender-minded to the tough-minded so as to harmonize empiricist ways of thinking with the more religious demands of human beings. It is also an instrumental process because it does not answer it directly, rather it is an attitude of looking away from principles and of looking towards facts. Another way of describing it is plastic, because it has no dogmas. Rather, it depends on individual satisfaction, hence, flexibility.

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