

**THE TRUTH OF PHOTOGRAPHS: SOME PHILOSOPHICAL
REFLECTIONS**
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Introduction:

Truth is one of the widely discussed areas in philosophy. The discussions in this field are primarily focused on the question of what is the nature of truth and how can we know if something is true or not. There are different categories of *truth bearers*¹ with which we associate the concept of truth. These categories are sentences or utterances, statements or assertions, beliefs that are associated with judgements or thoughts, and propositions.² The differences among these categories lead to the complexities in the theories of truth. There are different questions related to these categories, such as “what is meant by ‘*x* is true?’” or “what makes *x* true?” or “what is the criterion for *x* to be true?” etc. Here *x* refers to the different categories, such as the sentences or the statements. To address these questions, philosophers have devised different ways to look into the matter and these ways are the different theories of truth. There are five main theories of truth: the correspondence theory, the coherence theory, the pragmatic theory, the redundancy theory and the semantic theory. The aims of these theories of truth are various. A theory of truth should explain the nature of truth, the criterion of truth, the meaning of the word “true”, the use of the word “true”, and the purpose of saying that something is true.³ For example, in the case of “*x* is true” where *x* is a particular statement or proposition, the criterion for *x*’s being true, or what it means to say that *x* is true should be determinable following a theory of truth.

According to the correspondence theory, a statement or a proposition is true if it corresponds with the fact. For example, if I say “it is raining”, then the statement will be true if it is raining, and the statement will be false otherwise. Here, the criterion for the statement to be true is to correspond with the actual world. Coherence theory holds that a judgement or a statement is true if it coheres with other sets of judgements. Its truth is determined by observing whether it coheres with other

¹ David, Marian, (2004), “Theories of Truth” in *Handbook of Epistemology* (eds. Ilkka Niiniluoto, Matti Sintonen and Jan Woleński), USA: Springer-Science & Business Media, B.V, p. 331.

² Ibid., p. 331.

³ Ibid., p. 335.

judgements or not. According to the pragmatic theory of truth, we can know a statement or a judgement as true or false by use of it. If acting based on the statement can give the desired result, then the statement is true, otherwise false. The successful usability of the statement is the criterion here. The redundancy theory holds the view that it is meaningless to say "it is true that x ", where x is a statement, because it becomes redundant, and it does not add anything to the existing knowledge. For example, to say "it is true that the sun rises in the east" and the fact that the sun rises in the east is the same. Hence, using the prefix 'it is true' does not add anything new to the existing knowledge. That is why it is redundant to say "it is true that the sun rises in the east." The semantic theory of truth gives "an account of what truth consists in."⁴This theory, instead of analyzing the concept of truth, provides what truth consists in. For instance, when it says that "snow is white" iff snow is white, then it means that the statement "snow is white" will be true if and only if snow is white. It means that the truth of the sentence consists in fact. This theory by Alfred Tarski has a similarity with the correspondence theory.

The truth bearers, mentioned above, are not limited to these categories only. Truth is associated with other categories also. For example, photographs provide us with truth, but photographs themselves are not statements or sentences or beliefs. Rather photographs may convey some thoughts or beliefs and hence, they can convey true or false beliefs or thoughts or states of affairs. So, photographs can be used as a medium of non-verbal communication. Unlike verbal communication like using sentences etc., photographs non-verbally communicate an idea or a thought. As photographs can be used as a medium of communication, they are used for various purposes. For example, they can be used as evidence of something, archival of memory, as documents, to study about different things like astronomic events or anatomy of living beings, for medical purposes etc. All these uses of photographs are dependent upon the truth-giving feature of photographs. But the question here is: what makes photographs truthbearers? What is the criterion of the truth-giving characteristics of photographs or how do photographs give us the truth? This paper aims to answer these questions. To answer the question, we have different theories of

⁴ Walker, Ralph C. S., (2017), "Theories of Truth" in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Language* (2nd ed.) (eds. Bob Hale, Crispin Wright and Alexander Miller), USA: Wiley Blackwell., (2017), p. 548.

truth against which photographs and theories related to them will be tested. But the redundancy theory and the semantic theory are not relevant here as they focus on statements only. At first, we have to understand what is meant by the truth of photographs and what makes them truth bearers. Unless a photograph is true, there is no question of its ability to convey the truth.

Truth of Photographs: Scott Walden said, “pictures are regarded as arrangements of marks on surfaces which, when presented to our visual system, cause it to operate in many ways just as it would were it confronted, not with a picture, but with what the picture is a picture of.”⁵ For example, if someone went to The Taj Mahal and saw it from the River Yamuna, and later if that person saw a representation of The Taj Mahal from the same angle, it may result in similar perceptual belief. This may be a painting or a photograph of The Taj Mahal. We will have a firm perceptual belief if it is a photograph instead of a painting because, in the case of paintings, the painter perceives the scene and then paints it, whereas, in the case of a photograph, the camera mechanically captures the scene.

Perceptual beliefs are formed in two stages. At first, we get the perceptual inputs or data from the scene, and then we make our beliefs about that scene using some pre-existing knowledge or beliefs. In the case of photography, Walden suggests that we get perceptual information from a photograph and make our perceptual belief and we also make second-order beliefs about the first-order perceptual belief that those beliefs are true.⁶ This belief is based on the objective nature of photographs. A camera mechanically captures a scene. It captures different kinds of information about the object. Though there are some objections to the claim that a camera captures unbiased and objective information, which will be discussed in the next sections, from the beginning of photography its process was taken to be objective. This objective nature of photographs makes us believe that photographs are associated with truth. This belief in the truth of the information and message that we get from the photographs makes it a truth bearer.

⁵ Walden, S., (2008), pp. 97-98.

⁶ Ibid., p. 104.

Correspondence Theory of Truth and Photographs:

If we look at the history of photography, the technology related to photography has changed a lot, but the basic principle behind photography has remained the same as it was in the 1840s. The basic principle of photography is about capturing an image using light on a light-sensitive surface. In the beginning, Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, who is credited to have invented photography, captured images on a sensitized pewter plate. To capture the image, he exposed the plate for almost a day. Later Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre and William Henry Fox-Talbot in France and Britain respectively worked on it and made photographs by exposing the light-sensitive plate for a much lesser amount of time. From that time till today the basic principle of photography remains the same. The object has to be placed in front of the camera and by opening the shutter of the camera, light enters and falls onto a photosensitive plate or a sensor and thus the image is captured. That is why photographs are termed as the "drawings of nature" because, unlike paintings, photographs are not handmade objects. Photographs are captured mechanically or electronically. The process is automatic. So, photography does two important things. Firstly, it automates the image-making process and secondly, by making it automatic, it diminishes the role of human intervention in the form of drawing in image-making.

Photographs are mechanically produced images. As the camera captures mechanically, there is no place for the elimination of something. The camera will capture what is there in front of the camera. Roland Barthes said that a photograph is always about something. There has to be something to be captured.⁷ A camera can capture every detail of the object. Daguerre said that photographs are perfect in detail and accurate. A photograph represents what is there in the scene. Dominic McIver Lopes compared photography with the signalling system.⁸ He said, "...individual photographs are cues to the appearance of depicted scenes."⁹ He also said that photographs are "belief independent feature tracking."¹⁰ This is the reason behind the truth-giving ability of photographs. Photographs give us knowledge about the world

⁷ Barthes, R. (1981)

⁸ Lopes, D. M., (2016), p. 21.

⁹ Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 21

based on this characteristic. This similarity refers to the correspondence theory of truth. The basis of the correspondence theory of truth is the relation between the statement and the factual state of the affair. In the same way, the truth of photographs depends on the correspondence between the photograph and the factual world. So, it can be said that the truth giving characteristic of photographs can be theorized using the correspondence theory of truth.

But not all photographs correspond to the world. The advancement of technology makes it easier to change the characteristics of the object in the photograph. For instance, a flower can be captured using different filters of the lens, or with different white balance or exposure and this can result in a different colour of the flower in the photograph. This alteration can be done in post-production also. Brian Walski, a photojournalist from the *Los Angeles Times* once combined two images to produce one, which was published on the front page of the newspaper. This photograph was misleading and because of this when he admitted what he had done, he was dismissed from work.¹¹ This possibility of manipulation of photographs puts into question the truth-giving character of photographs. To check whether any such alteration has been done one needs to see whether the photograph corresponds to the fact. But this is often not possible, which forces us to check the coherence of the photograph with other available documents including other photographs.

The Coherence Theory of Truth and Photographs:

According to the coherence theory of truth, a statement is true if it belongs to a coherent system of beliefs. This theory emphasizes the relationship between statements. For example, if someone says that “an accident happened on the highway between a car and a helicopter”, this statement will not easily qualify as true, because a helicopter is usually not found on a highway. Here, the statement does not cohere with other statements. But if someone says that “an accident happened on the highway between a car and a bus” and some other sources also support this statement then this statement can be regarded as true. So, the relation between statements can make a belief true or false.

¹¹ Walden, S., (2008), p. 91.

Bhopal Gas Tragedy is one of the most tragic industrial disaster events that ever happened in the world. The disaster took place in Bhopal in a pesticide plant run by Union Carbide India Limited on the night of 2-3 December in 1984. Toxic Methyl Isocyanate (MIC) gas leaked from the plant and around 600,000 people were exposed to the toxic gas. Because of this, around 3,000 people died instantly and over 500,000 people got injured. But the effect of this accident did not stop there. From 1984 till today people who were exposed to the gas are suffering and more than 20,000 have died of related conditions. Even the second and third generation of children are being born with disabilities. These statistical data can indicate the terrible effect of the disaster, but these data cannot show the pain that people suffered due to the disaster. Raghu Rai, one of the most prominent photographers of India covered this disaster and took photographs that depict the pain and suffering of that incident. Let us see some of his photographs and from these photographs, we can see how the coherence theory of truth can be useful in case of determining the truth of photographs.

Figure 1 depicts some of the people who lost their sight because of exposure to the gas leak. Their lungs were also got affected. Figure 2 shows that a man is carrying his dead wife. Figure 3 depicts the burial of an unknown child, who died of the toxic gas. Figure 4 depicts some of the aborted fetuses preserved in jars. Regarding this photograph, Rai, in an interview, talked about his conversation with Dr Satpathy from Bhopal who said that the women who were full pregnant on that night and running for their lives, got aborted on the way. The fetuses were picked up by the medical team later on.¹²



Figure 1



Figure 2

¹² Art Talk, (2018).



Figure 3

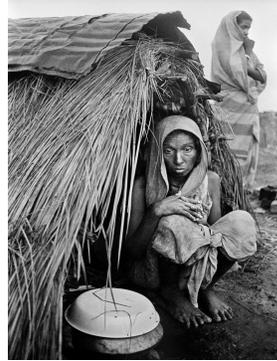


Figure 4

All these photographs cohere with each other. All of these photographs are from the place of the disaster and none of them depicts any irrelevant visuals. Moreover, other photographers' photographs of the same event depict images of the same sort. So, as the coherence theory says, if a statement coheres with other sets of statements, then the statement will be true; similarly, these photographs cohere with other photographs and hence, become true.

Let us see another example. In 1971, Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) saw a revolution that ultimately brought liberation to them. After the partition of India in 1947, Bangladesh was under the control of Pakistan. In 1971, the people of Bangladesh fought for their rights which finally liberated them. But after the liberation, thousands of people came to India as refugees. This event is also captured by photographs that show the pain of the people who came to India as refugees. The photographs given below are taken by Raghu Rai.

Figure 5 shows the suffering of an old refugee woman who was eager to go back to her home. Figure 6 shows the uncertainty of being a refugee. Figure 7 portrays many people who took shelter in Hume pipes. Figure 8 shows the refugees in search of shelter. Figure 9 is a photograph of Delhi.



Figure 5



Figure 6

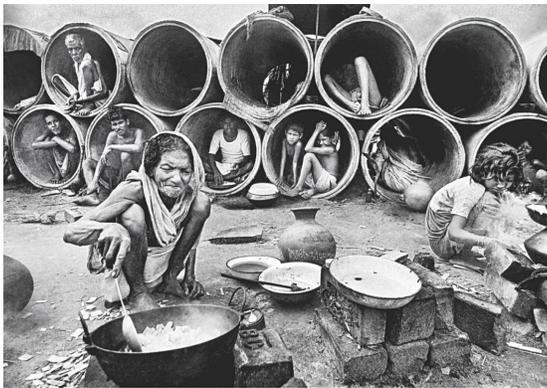


Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9

All these photographs depict the pain and suffering of the people. These photographs also cohere with each other, except Figure 9 which has a different context. Figure 9 is a photograph of Delhi's Chawri Bazaar. This photograph has no connection with the others. So, we find that figures 5-8 can be regarded as true based on the coherence among them. But figure 9 is irrelevant here. But this individual photograph has some documentary value based on correspondence. So, though there is coherence between the photographs, ultimately what the photographs depict and their truth depends upon correspondence. Because of correspondence with fact, individual photographs become true, and when they cohere with other photographs, they give a broader true story about the event. The problem that arises here is that a photographer may have a certain perspective on an event. This can make the photographer focus on certain aspects of the event leading to a partial view of the matter posing as the truth. A set of photographs taken by a person or persons with a similar perspective may be coherent with each other, but this does not ensure that the photographs show the truth of the event. Hence, in looking for coherence as the giver of truth, one has to check with photographs taken by different individuals and documents from diverse sources.

Pragmatic Theory of Truth and Photographs:

The pragmatic theory of truth is about the application of a given statement. If a statement is successfully applicable then the statement is true, otherwise false. In the case of photographs, we have seen that the truth of the photograph depends on the correspondence of the photograph with the fact or the coherence between the photographs. But sometimes both these ways of ascertaining truth fail to give the truth of the photograph. In such a case, the content of the photograph may be applied to see whether it is true or not. Suppose we get multiple sets of coherent photographs of an event and every set shows a different story about the event. In such a case, if possible, one can go to the place of the event and verify which set of photographs shows the fact. But this has its limitations. Not every event can be verified later. In those cases, the pragmatic theory needs to be applied where we judge the truth of the photograph by using it. For instance, when people are lost somewhere and we get some photographs of that person to identify, if the lost person is found successfully using that photograph, we can say that the information in the photograph was true. This kind of use of the photograph is very common in different investigations

including forensic investigations, etc. Hine was deeply influenced by William James's pragmatism. According to James's pragmatism, knowledge is experience-based and can be considered as such only if it is successful in social, psychological and natural contexts. This influence can be seen when we analyze Hine's photographs. Hine believed that his photographs speak for him. We can know about his intellectual and political life from his photographs. This is possible if we use photographs as the conveyer of the intention and idea of the photographer.

Here are some of Hine's photographs. Figure 10 is the photograph of the Pennsylvania coal breakers. All the labourers are children. Hine said about this photograph, "There is work that profits children, and there is work that brings profit only to employers. The object of employing children is not to train them, but to get high profits from their work."⁴⁵ Figure 11 and Figure 12 are from different mines where children were working. These photographs show the terrible situation of the American children. Because of these documentations, activism against child labour developed and labour acts were amended.



Figure 10

⁴⁵ The Guardian, (2018)



Figure 11



Figure 12

So, it can be said that these photographs successfully conveyed the idea and thought behind the photographs to the people. Moreover, these thoughts are not objective, rather they are experienced. That is why these photographs become true in terms of pragmatism. Another thing is that, not only Hine's photographs, any documentary photograph, including earlier examples by Raghu Rai can also successfully communicate the ideas behind the photographs. But the role of the correspondence cannot be denied in these photographs also. The experience and the thought are important behind the documentary photographs, but the content of the photograph does not depend on the thought only, but it is the subject of the photograph that matters and that depends on correspondence.

Conclusion:

So far, we have seen that there are different theories of truth and the truth of photographs as a medium of communication can be assessed in various ways. The truth of photographs is based on correspondence with fact. However, we cannot always check that correspondence. That is why we have to look for coherence with other photographs of that object or event. In different photo stories, photographs cohere with each other and give us the truth about an event. But these kinds of photographs may also mislead, and in such a case we have to rely on the application of the photograph. The truth of the photograph depends on the mechanism of the camera and its ability to capture the event as it was. But at the same time, this

mechanism can also lead to misleading photographs. Though the truth of photographs is sometimes ascertained based on coherence or pragmatism, it primarily depends upon the relation of correspondence with reality. The truth of photographs has multiple modes of establishing it, but at the most bottom level, it depends on correspondence.

List of Illustrations:

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 Figure 3: Raghu Rai: Burial of an Unknown Child, 1984. © Raghu Rai.
 Figure 4: Raghu Rai: An Aborted Fetus When the Tragedy Struck, 1984. © Raghu Rai.
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