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A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF THE CONCEPT OF TRUTH IN IGBO THOUGHT SYSTEM

EJEH PAULINUS C. (PhD)
Philosophy Unit,
General Studies Division,
Enugu State University of Science and Technology
Agbani, Enugu State, Nigeria.
Email: paulinus.ejeh@esut.edu.ng
Phone: +2347038546333

Abstract
The concept of truth and the theories of truth are epistemological issues that are of special interest to philosophers world-wide. This is so because our knowledge of the world depends largely on the ability to show or prove that bodies of knowledge we claim to know are not just a collection of falsity. In this light, therefore, this paper strives to examine the concept of truth in Igbo thought system. It critically highlights also the similarities between the Western concept of truth and the Igbo concept of truth. The study is of the view that the correspondence theory of truth is the closest to the nature of truth even though it does not adequately satisfy or meet up with the requirements needed for an adequate theory of truth. Furthermore, the work concludes that the Igbo concept of truth corresponds with the Western correspondence theory of truth.

Keywords: Conceptualization, Philosophy, Epistemology, Truth, Igbo Thought System.

Introduction

All men by nature desire to know, says Aristotle and this desire to know is the quest for truth. Since all men desire to know, the African not only desires to know but equally and persistently seeks and searches for the truth. However it is not quite easy to spell out that which is peculiar about the African quest for truth because Africa is not a homogeneous entity. There are over fifty countries in Africa made up of thousands of ethnic groups each with its own specific culture. Thus there are certain similarities between one African culture and another as well as differences between them. This however does not mean that philosophical activity is not possible among the African people as many Western philosophers had erroneously believed and argued in its favour. In fact, the diversity of African cultures and languages do indeed enrich philosophical activity in Africa.

There is no particularization of truth in Africa or elsewhere in the world. In other words, there is no particular concept or meaning of truth that can be said to apply or that can represent the whole of African concept of truth. In fact, there is no African concept of truth, for truth is universal. There cannot be truth for the Africans different from the truth for the Europeans or Asians. There is only one truth and it is eternal, unchanging and applies to all irrespective of colour or race. Thus, what is known or referred to as African concept of truth is nothing but the universal truth exposed by and through the African world view.

Be that as it may, the question "what is truth?" has engaged the human mind in all ages. Reflections on our own individual experiences reveal how this problem arises in many ways in our lives. There is no absolute agreement among philosophers as to the correct account of the concept of truth. One obvious point, however, is that **true** as it applies to statements or propositions should be distinguished from the **true** in expressions such as true friend. To ask what is truth is in fact to ask what it means to say that a proposition is true. What do we mean when we say that a proposition is true or that it is not true? This question has been traditionally handled and answered in three or more different ways by philosophers and each of these answers constitutes a theory about the nature of truth.

Therefore, the task of this paper is to examine the concept and theories of truth in the light of an African thought system, specifically, the Igbo conception of truth.

Theories of Truth

There are three classical theories of truth, namely the correspondence theory, the coherence theory, and the pragmatic theory. However, apart from these three main theories, there are other theories which include the dialectical theory, the redundancy theory, the semantic theory and the relativistic theory of truth. The major problem posed by these theories of truth is to determine which of them represents the appropriate or adequate position of truth. In this paper, we shall concentrate on only four theories of truth, namely the correspondence theory, the coherence theory, the pragmatic theory and the semantic theory.

The Correspondence Theory

The correspondence theory of truth is the oldest, best known, and perhaps most natural theory of truth. It states that truth is a correspondence to fact. This theory is said to have originated from Aristotle, who had maintained that, to say of what is not that it is and what is that it is not, is false; and that to say that what is that it is and what is not that it is not, is true. Hence the correspondence theory holds that truth is the correspondence of the mind with reality (***Encyclopedia of Philosophy***, 1969:223). For instance, if I say that my lecturer has a car, my statement is true if it corresponds with the actual situation or case outside – that is, if it is a fact that my lecturer actually has a car. But if my statement does not correspond with the actual situation then my statement is false. In order to test the truth of an idea or belief we must presumably compare it with the reality in some sense. However, of all the possible theories of truth, the correspondence theory connects most directly with the idea that truth is an objective property of statements.

However, two main difficulties have been raised against the correspondence theory of truth. The first is that it has been claimed that the correspondence theory presents a misleading and overly simple picture of how we determine the truth or falsity of statements. We do not, and really could not, check our statements one by one against reality. Besides, in order to make the comparison, we must know what it is that we are comparing, namely, the belief on the one hand and the reality on the other. Again, do our beliefs agree or correspond with facts in the sense that they copy or resemble them?

The second is that the correspondence theory operates with the purely formal or non-operational idea of "checking to see whether P corresponds with reality." This however, is not what can actually be done. Therefore, this theory of truth does not adequately satisfy what the nature and criteria of truth are and should be.

The Coherence Theory

The coherence theory of truth maintains that "the truth of a proposition must be measured by its consistency with the whole system of knowledge" (Wallace, 1977:116). In other words, the theory states that a proposition is true if and only if a proposition is in agreement with other propositions in a system of propositions such that proposition strengthens the acceptability of the entire system. Thus a statement is true if it coheres with, supports and strengthens those statements already known to be true, but if a statement is in conflict with other statements already known to be true, the statement is then false.

There are some difficulties with the coherence theory of truth. The first is that it is more plausible to regard coherence as a necessary condition than it is to regard it as a sufficient condition for truth. In other words, statements that do not cohere are automatically excluded from the class of truths, but statements that do cohere are not automatically included in the class of truths. The second is that we do not (and could not) test for coherence with all true statements since no one is in possession of all true statements. "Checking to see whether P coheres with all true statements" is as totally nonoperational as "checking to see whether p corresponds with reality." Like the correspondence theory, the coherence theory also does not meet up with the demand of an adequate meaning and concept of truth.

The Pragmatic Theory

The pragmatist theory of truth holds that a statement or a belief is true if and only if "it works," if it allows us to predict certain results, if it allows us to function effectively in everyday life, and if it encourages further inquiry or helps us lead better lives. Truth is something relative and has reference to a changing reality; things are never true in themselves but only in their application to existential situations. In this theory, then, the notion of truth is replaced by that of verification. Thus an idea is true if it works and leads to beneficial results; otherwise it is false (***Encyclopedia of Philosophy***, 1969:427).

The Semantic Theory

The semantic theory of truth (also referred to as Minimalist theory) was proposed by Alfred Tarski. The theory makes truth a property of sentences rather than in judgments. According to the theory, to say that something is true is to make an assertion about a sentence. In other words, the semantic theory holds that assertions about truth are in a metal-language and apply to statements of the base language (Tarski,, 1944:4). The semantic theory however, lays down the condition which any account of truth must satisfy. For instance, if I say that "All Nigerians are black', Tarski would say that the statement is true if and only if "all Nigerians" are really black. In other words, the statement "all Nigerians are black' is true if and only if all Nigerians are really black.

The Features which an adequate Theory of Truth Must Have

According to Bertrand Russell, there are three points to observe in the attempt to discover the nature of truth. In other words, there are three requisite or features which any theory of truth must have or fulfill. This includes the following points, "our theory of truth must be such as to admit of its opposite, falsehood" (Russell, 1992:70). Russell believes that some philosophers have failed adequately to satisfy this condition. According to him, these philosophers have rather constructed theories according to which all our thinking ought to have been true, and then had the greatest difficulty in finding a place for falsehood.

The second point is that, beliefs and falsehood are necessary for truth. Hence "it seems fairly evident that if there were no beliefs there could be no falsehood; and no truth either, in the sense in which truth is correlative to falsehood" (Russell, 1992:70). If we imagine a world of mere matter, there would be no room for falsehood in such a world, and although it would contain what may be called "facts", it would not contain any truths, in the sense in which truths are things of the same kind as falsehoods. In fact, truth and falsehood are properties of beliefs and statements: hence a world of mere matter, since it would contain no beliefs or statements, would also contain no truth or falsehood.

The third and last point is that "truth or falsehood of a belief always depends upon something which lies outside the belief itself" (Russell, 1992:70). For instance, if I believe that Murtala Muhammad was murdered, I believe truly, not because of any intrinsic quality of my belief, which could be discovered by mere examining the belief, but because of an historical event which happened some decades ago. If I believe that Murtala Muhammad died on his bed, I believe falsely; no degree of vividness in my belief, or of care in arriving at it, prevents it from being false again because of what happened long ago, and not because of any intrinsic property of my belief. Hence, although truth and falsehood are properties of beliefs, they are properties dependent upon the relations of the beliefs to other things, not upon any internal quality of the beliefs to other things, not upon any internal quality of the beliefs.

Therefore, in line with what we have said above, in seeking for a theory about the nature of truth, we must seek a theory which (1) allows truth to have an opposite, namely falsehood, (2) makes truth a property of beliefs, but (3) makes it a property wholly dependent upon the relation of the beliefs to outside things. Meanwhile, apart from the above requisites a theory of truth must have, there are still other criteria of truth which are the marks by which we know the nature of truth. Such criteria are coherence and workability. In the past, agreement of majority or indeed mankind was regarded as a criterion for truth. But today, universal agreement has lost its standing as there is the possibility of falsehood in a universally agreed issue.

The Concept of Truth in Igbo Thought System

The Igbo, have some words and phrases which they use to express the concept of truth such as *eziokwu*. *Ezi-Okwu* is actually a combination of two words: *ezi* which means correct, genuine, right or good; and *okwu* which means word or speech. *Ezi okwu* therefore means literarily good talk, the correct sentence, right word, or the appropriate statement. In other words *eziokwu* means the correct response to a question or as Nze rightly pointed out that "the common understanding, (among the Igbo) is that 'eziokwu' - truth is used to represent utterances (that is, the lack of inner contradictions) that are true" (Nze, 1994:4). Other phrases associated with the concept of truth in Igbo thought system is Obughi Eziokwu (it is not Good talk), and Asi (Lie). Thus among the Igbo, truth means Eziokwu, which literally translates to "good talk". For the Igbo, to be is to be true to what one really is. The Igbo put this ontological principle in the maxim: Eziokwu Bu Ndu (Truth is life; life is truth). In Igbo, ethico-ontological praxis, not only in the moral sense is the utterance of truth an affirmation. In the ontological order, the true is the living. Truth is authenticity, (Ugwu

ndu). Not to be in the truth is not to be in life, in dynamism, self-manifestation and the vital energy. It is to die. Only the true lives. The untrue disappears into the false-hood of non-being.

The opposite of Eziokwu (good talk) is Obughi Eziokwu (it is not good talk), i.e. if we take the opposite of truth in English to be falsity. Obughi Eziokwu (it is not good talk), translates cognitively in Igbo, unless there is reason to believe that a person is deliberately making a falsehood in which case, Obughi Eziokwu (it is not good talk) takes on a moral undertone. In fact, it now moves from Obughi Eziokwu (it is not good talk) to asi (lies). When a statement gets to the level of asi (lies), it takes on a purely moral undertone and the sincerity of the person involved is called to question.

There are degrees of truth among the Igbo. For instance, to say of a statement that obughi eziokwu (it is not good talk). Is not the same as saying that a statement is asi (lie), because to say that a statement is asi is to cast aspersions on a person's moral standard. But to say that obughi eziokwu is neither the same as eziokwu (good talk) nor is it asi. It is more like a bridge between eziokwu and asi. It is used usually in a cognitive sense unless it is suspected that a person's statement is a deliberate falsehood. This of course brings on the issue of intention on the part of the person making the statement. But since there is no way of knowing the intentions of a person for making a particular statement, it is necessary to assume that the person is using a statement in an innocent sense until proved wrong, in which case, obughi eziokwu is applied to a person with a moral sense.

The notion of truth is so central and important for the Igbo such that there are a number of ways in which it is used to capture the concept and real meaning of truth in Igbo thought system. Consider the following Igbo statements:

'Ọnye ezi okwu'	-	A truthful person or one who is known for truth
'O kwuru ezi okwu'	-	He told the truth or He talked good or reasonable talk.

Here as already noted, 'okwu' means speech or talk in Igbo and is usually preceded or modified by the word 'ezi' which by its very nature form the root word for good, kind, true, genuine, etc as can be seen in the following examples:

'Ezi ihe'	-	A good thing or something useful.
'Ezi mmadụ'	-	A good person or kind person.
'Ezi Okwu'	-	Good talk or true talk.
'Ọ bụ ezi?'	-	Is it true?
'Ọ bụ ezi'	-	It is true.

In addition to *ezi okwu*, the Igbo also describe the truth of a statement with the expression *Ihe mere eme or ihe mere*, which means what really happened or what happened. For instance the Igbo would say:

'Ọ bụ ihe mere eme'	-	It is what actually happened
'Ọ bụghị ihe mere'	-	It is not what happened.
'Ọ bụ gịnị mere?	-	What happened?
'Ọ bụ ihe mere eme?'	-	Did it really happen?

In the Igbo thought system, the expression *ihe mere* or *ihe mere eme* makes the Igbo concept of truth clearer and in line with 'what is the case', 'what agrees with reality,' or as 'testimony'. Thus *ihe mere* or *ihe mere eme* refers to an event which has been accomplished or perfected. Hence, the expression, *ihe mere eme* makes truth an empirical fact and not an intuitional fact. In other words, truth as illustrated by *ihe mere eme* becomes something that can be investigated and verified empirically. By this very reason, the Igbo expression *ihe mere eme* represents for the Igbo truth as correspondence since what is the case agrees with what happened in reality. Besides, the Igbo also understand truth in the Aristotelian sense as rightly noted by Aristotle that, "to say of what is that it is not, or what is not that it is, is false while to say of what is that it is, or what is not that it is not, is true" (Opata, 1998:77). In other words, the Igbo conceive truth as the conformity of the mind with reality. Hence, for the Igbo, when what is in the mind conforms or agrees with what is in reality, then that is *eziokwu* or truth.

In addition to tallying with the correspondence theory of truth, *Ihe mere eme* can also be used to maintain the principle of the semantic theory of truth, since the semantic theory of truth makes truth a property of sentences rather than in judgments. The theory holds that, to say that something is true is to make an assertion about a sentence. For example, the statement "The country is bad" is true if and only if the country is really bad, as what is the case can refer to the content of a propositional sentence agreeing with reality, rather than just asserting the historicity of what happened.

From the ongoing, the expression *Ihe mere eme* seems to be more in line with the very nature of the Igbo concept of truth and is therefore preferred, since it does not exhibit the apparent ambiguity inherent in the expression 'Ezi okwu'. This toes the same line with the western conception of truth in which the correspondence theory is seen as the better representative of what truth is. Thus, while the expression *Ihe mere eme* defines what truth is for the Igbo, *ezi okwu* gives the criteria to strengthen it. This is exactly the case with the Western correspondence and coherence theory of truth in which the correspondence theory defines or explains the meaning of truth while the coherence theory gives the criteria for truth. Thus, *ihe mere* eme is strengthened by *ezi* okwu as can be shown in the example below:

'Ọ bụ ezi okwu?' Is that true?
'Eeh! Ọ bụ ihe mere eme' Yes! It is what happened.
'Ezi okwu! Ọ bụ ihe mere?' Truly! Is this what happened really?
Eeh! ezi okwu, Ọ bụ Ihe mere eme' In truth, it is what happened.

Attributes of Truth in Igbo Thought System

The Igbo have a number of ways in which the concept of truth is characterized. For instance, the Igbo would say: *Eziokwu dika ehihie (efifie).* Truth is like noonday. The implication of this statement is that truth is self-evident and there is nothing anybody can do to destroy it. That is why the Igbo say: *Anaghị eli eziokwu n'ala* meaning that truth cannot be buried in the ground. Or that ezi *okwu dịka afọ ime, adịghị ekpuchi ya aka.* This means that truth is like pregnancy, even if you cover it, it definitely shows. These expressions portray the indestructible character of truth in Igbo thought system, for the Igbo believe that no one can suppress truth even though the Igbo also say: *Eziokwu na-elu ilu*, meaning that Truth is bitter.

Equally, the Igbo compare truth with afternoon hence they say *ezi okwu dịka ehihie*, which literally translates to 'truth is like noonday'. The moral fact behind these expressions is that in any speech event, what is true easily stands out and can neither be hidden nor destroyed since truth is self- evidential and self-explanatory, and does not require any interpretation or explication. This is why the Igbo say: *A naghị eli ezi okwu n'ala, makana elie ya na la, opute ome.* This literally means that truth cannot be buried in the ground, because, if it is buried, it will germinate'. Hence the Igbo believe in the indestructibility of truth.

The Igbo also strongly believe that 'truth is harsh to the ears' as well as that truth is bitter or hard to swallow, but it must be told. Hence the Igbo say: *ezi okwu na-afụ ụfụ na nti* and that *ezi okwu na-elu ilu*. This expression normally surfaces among the Igbo when there is an attempt to suppress truth or uncover truth that people would rather want hidden.

Consequently, all traditional societies have a strong moral orientation in their conception of truth. Truth sustains relationships with God, the deities and their fellow men. Truth is paramount in Igbo life and they believe it is what gives life to any society. Hence, the traditional Igbo society is built on truth and the basis of this is trust which is primarily dependent on the ability of the individual members to tell the truth to one another. It is the basis of their faith in God and in the people. Truth is the foundation of any Igbo community.

Truth, Morality and the Igbo

It is to be noted that most Igbo words are highly polysemic (have more than one meaning), and as such one expression could mean several things which can only be made explicit in context. The same applies to the notion of truth in Igbo, whether such truth be moral or cognitive or both. For instance, if the Igbo say of something someone has said that *obughi eziokwu* (it is not good talk), they do not automatically assume that the statement is necessarily an *asi,* (lies) unless they have reason to suspect that the person in question has consciously and deliberately made a falsehood. For instance, if while in our room with some friends, the doorbell rings, and one of our friends asserts that it is Emeka, another one of the friends. We may go to the door to ascertain whether it is indeed Emeka; and on discovering that it is not Emeka, we may say *obughi eziokwu* (it is not good talk), without meaning to suggest that our friend has told an *asi* (a lie). In the Igbo rendition, *obughi eziokwu*, is truth in its purely cognitive sense, in this case *obughi eziokwu* would mean "falsity" in English language. However, despite the fact that *obughi eziokwu* is truth in its cognitive sense in Igbo thought system, it could also mean it is an *asi* if we have reason to suspect that a person is consciously and deliberately making falsehood. This brings in a moral aspect. It can also depend on the receiver of the statement, i.e the sense in which he says of a statement that *obughi eziokwu.*

It is often said among the Igbo that morality is intertwined with truth and that is why for instance, only morally upright men who are sworn to speak the truth are given the ozo title. Unfortunately, this tradition of giving the Ozo title only to morally upright men is almost obliterated from the Igbo customs in most of the contemporary Igbo societies. This is because the Ozo title is no longer conferred only on upright

men who are known to be men of truth and honesty, but also even to men with crooked ways of life, full of dishonesty and untruthfulness, as long as the one requesting for the title has enough money to spray on the people conferring the title. This however does not in any way undermine our already stated fact that among the Igbo, morality is intertwined with truth. It is on this note that Udefi (2014:115) rightly observed that "the Igbo would not refer to *onye asi* (a liar) as knowledgeable and the reason is that both knowledge and truth are regarded as possessing divine and moral status".

The Igbo have various ways of verifying the truth of a claim or event. For according to Udefi (2014:115), "it is not enough for the Igbo to see how propositions correspond with facts or the weight of superior logic of the argument but it is important to consider the person's omume (character), that is, his moral standing within the community is paramount. Thus, for the Igbo, truth verification relies more on first-hand experience or what someone experiences or sees with his eyes together with what one apprehends cognitively. In other words, the reliable way of knowing what is regarded as true or *eziokwu* comes more from what one experiences or sees and this is why what the Igbo claim to know is what, in the final analysis, is the case or true (2014:115).

Meanwhile, the Igbo use the ọfọ symbol to designate truth and justice as a principle of life. Hence the Igbo statement:

Ọfọ ka ide ji awa ala
Truth and justice are the content of life
Oji ọfọ anaghị atọ n'ije or Oji ofo g'ana.
The man of truth is never stranded in a journey

In these sayings, the Igbo are emphasizing the centrality of truth in human relationship, organization and morality. This is further made obvious in the Igbo saying: *Ezi okwu bụ ndụ.* Truth is life. Among the Igbo, truth is said to be life itself. Hence truth-being and truth-telling are the tests of life and morality. Therefore, for the Igbo, there is life in truth and only a man of truth has life. On the other hand, a man without truth has "no life in him" and is in darkness. The commitment to Truth is a fundamental Igbo philosophy without which there would be neither regard nor respect for human life and dignity.

Evaluation and Conclusion

From our discussion so far, it is clear that the concept of truth as well as that which concerns the theories of truth is a perennial one that has got no one or universally accepted answer or solution. However, as we have seen, of all the theories of truth, it is only the correspondence theory that is closest to the nature of truth. In spite of this fact however, the correspondence theory does not adequately meet up with the requirement needed for an adequate theory of truth.

Again, it is clear that things are well spelt out in the Igbo concept of truth. The Igbo concept of truth tallies or corresponds with the correspondence theory of truth since it depends on verification of facts before a statement can be said to be *eziokwu, obughi eziokwu* and *asi.*

However, there are some statements which are not empirically verifiable and this poses a problem in its understanding in other languages. Any attempt to translate this class of statement or concepts from one language to another (in this case the Igbo language) is intrinsically fraught with problems. Meanwhile, it is worth noting that among the Igbos when you tell someone (especially an elder) that what he said "*abughi eziokwu",* (not good talk) what comes automatically and immediately to the persons mind and even in the mind of the listeners is that you are accusing the person of lying. The person in question would reply "so I am lying then if what I said is not good talk or *abughi eziokwu"*. It will take a good deal of explanation to convince the person that you are not necessarily or actually saying that he is lying (*asi*) but that you are saying that his statement is false or *abughi eziokwu*.

We wish to point out here that even though in Igbo thought system, we have the equivalent elements of the western concept of truth namely, true, false and lie-*eziokwu, obughi eziokwu* and *asi*; in practice, the Igbo pay attention to only two, namely: true and lie - *eziokwu and asi*. Falsity or falsehood seems to play a minimal role or even no role at all in the Igbo concept of truth. That is why when you tell someone that what he says *abughi-eziokwu*, you are asking for a quarrel or misunderstanding between you and the person since the person in question would in effect understand it that you are accusing him of lying. Even when you try to explain what you mean, bringing in the concept of falsehood, he would still retort, "if what I said is not *eziokwu* (good talk), what is it then other than *asi* (lie)".

Thus in Igbo society, one is always very wary in using words like *obughi eziokwu* especially when talking to or addressing elders or an elder, otherwise, one would be ready to go through some series of explanations and tutorial undertakings, which in most cases, always fail to satisfy the mind of the person (the elder) or

even cast doubt in his mind with regard to your attitude towards elders. In other words, he (the elder) might begin to see you as a bad person or a spoilt brat.

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