The Coherence and Correspondence
Theories of Truth

The correspondence theory of truth considers the truth of propositions to consist in the correspondence between a given proposition and reality. To pin this notion of truth down a clear definition of truth and falsity must be stated.

One such definition is the following:

A proposition $p$ is true if and only if $p$ corresponds to some fact
A proposition $p$ is false if and only if $p$ does not correspond to any fact

What does “if and only if” mean?

Consider the following example:

Janet will get an A on her exam if and only if Janet studies hard.

This means two things. It states both that “If Janet studies hard, then she will get an A” and that “If Janet gets an A on her exam then she must have studied hard.” In other words, the implication goes both ways.
To say that $p$ is true if $p$ corresponds to some fact means that if $p$ corresponds to some fact, then $p$ is true. Another way of saying this is that the correspondence between $p$ and some fact is *sufficient* to make $p$ true.

To say that $p$ is true *only if* $p$ corresponds to some fact means that it must be the case that $p$ corresponds to some fact in order for $p$ to be true. Another way of saying this is that the correspondence between $p$ and some fact is *necessary* to make $p$ true.

To say, then, that $p$ is true *if and only if* $p$ corresponds to some fact means that both of the two conditions just considered hold. This could be stated by saying that the correspondence between $p$ and some fact is both necessary and sufficient for the truth of $p$.

Given this clarification let us come back to the definition of truth stated above:

A proposition $p$ is true if and only if $p$ corresponds to some fact
A proposition $p$ is false if and only if $p$ does not correspond to any fact
There are a variety of ways of criticizing this definition.

One of the main criticisms is that it fails as a definition of truth because we can never know if any of our statements are true. This is because the facts that our statements correspond to are beyond possible experience. We can never know whether or not the objects involved exist and whether the stated relations between them obtain.

Consider Prof. Thorp’s example from class: “The monkey is on the mat.” We cannot know that the monkey and the mat exist and that if they exist that the monkey stands in the relation “on” to the mat.

One should think about how to reconcile the common beliefs we have about what exists and the crucial claim about what we can know in the above criticism.
The coherence theory of truth states that the truth of a proposition consists in its coherence with the other beliefs that are held.

A definition of this notion of truth is the following:

A proposition $p$ is true if and only if it coheres with a specified set of propositions

The term “coherence” here can be considered in different ways. The simplest of these, perhaps, is that coherence is understood to be identified with consistency.

What does it mean for two propositions to be consistent?

It means that considering both propositions to be true does not lead to a contradiction. Similarly, a set of propositions are consistent if considering them all to be true does not lead to a contradiction.
In order to understand how consistency is involved here consider the following example:

Until the late 1800’s it was believed that thorough hand washing before surgery was not necessary. In the late 1800’s the role of germs in the cause of disease was discovered. This implied that by not washing their hands thoroughly doctors were actually contributing to the spread of disease. Since it is the responsibility of doctors to not harm their patients, it became inconsistent for doctors to continue to believe that thorough hand washing is not required before surgery. Thus, the belief that hand washing before surgery was not required, which previously was true according to the coherence theory, became false as it was no longer consistent with the other beliefs held by doctors.

One of the common criticisms of the coherence theory is that one person can have a fully consistent systems of beliefs that is inconsistent with another person’s fully consistent system of beliefs. It seems to go against our intuitions that the truth of a proposition is relative to particular people.

Consider this: suppose that a psychopath forgot her wallet at home and her belief that it is better to kill someone and take their money than to go home and get her wallet is consistent with her other beliefs, making that belief true. Would we really want to accept that that statement is true in any sense?
Consider the following statement:

Copper conducts electricity

What does it mean to say that this statement is true according to the two theories of truth we have examined? How could we know whether the statement is true or not in both cases? Consider the role that evidence plays in the determination of truth.
Consider the following statement:

It is wrong to kill people

What does it mean to say that this statement is true according to the two theories of truth we have examined? How could we know whether the statement is true or not in both cases? Consider the role that evidence plays in the determination of truth.
Consider the following statement:

J.S. Bach is the greatest composer of the 18th century

What does it mean to say that this statement is true according to the two theories of truth we have examined? How could we know whether the statement is true or not in both cases? Consider the role that evidence plays in the determination of truth.
Consider the following statements:

The majority of Canadians support the use of capital punishment

All swans are white

What does it mean to say that these statements are true according to the two theories of truth we have examined? How could we know whether the statement is true or not in both cases? Consider the role that evidence plays in the determination of truth.