

PROPOSITIONAL RELIABILITY

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Abstract.

The paper elucidates the contrast between statements that are true and those which, while literally false, are nevertheless almost true. It maintains that in practical contexts such “approximate truths” often suffice to meet the purposes at issue.

ملخص

يقوم هذا البحث بتوضيح الاختلاف بين تقريرات هي صادقة و أخرى بينما هي كاذبة حرفياً، تكون بالرغم من ذلك صادقة على وجه تقريبي. يؤكد البحث على أن هذه "الحقائق التقريبية" تكفي في أغلب السياقات العملية لبلوغ الأهداف المقصودة.

Résumé.

L'article met au clair le contraste entre les énoncés qui sont vrais et ceux qui, bien qu'ils soient littéralement faux, sont néanmoins presque vrais. Il maintient que dans les contextes pratiques de telles « vérités approximatives » suffisent souvent pour atteindre les buts recherchés.

1. TRUTH VS. RELIABILITY

A statement is true when what it affirms is actually the case, that is, when it “accords with reality,” as the classic formula *adaequatio ad rem* has it. It thereby lies in the logic of things that a statement which entails a single false consequence cannot be true. Indeed, even a statement which, in the presence of some truth, entails a falsehood cannot itself be true. Moreover, truth is standardly conceived of as subject to a dichotomous bivalence. On the orthodox conception of the matter a statement is true or it is not: there

is no matter of degree—of more or less—about it. At present our concern will be with the reliability of *contentions* or *claims* and not (as would also be perfectly possible) with the reliability of *sources* or *claimants*. As here understood, the reliability of a contention or claim consists in its being such that in the vast majority (or virtually all) cases in which we accept it as a premiss in our reasonings, the conclusions we reach will be true.

However, reliability is something inherently different from truth. A statement is reliable to the extent that its acceptance—its inclusion to the body of accepted truth—will not lead us into falsity. In treating a highly reliable statement as true we may indeed go astray in our reasonings—but this will only happen on a comparatively rare basis.

Greek architects used 3Erreur ! as their value for π . Their equation $\pi = 3\text{Erreur !}$ was of course false in being off the actual value by roughly 1/1000. But for virtually all practical purposes then at issue, this “incorrect” equation, $\pi = 3\text{Erreur !}$, was good enough. In actual practice it proved to be highly reliable.

Accordingly, a statement is reliable if it is “roughly true” that is true in most cases, circumstances or conditions. Such a reliable statement is not “far off the mark” as regards the truth of the matter. It is correct apart from some relatively small-scale emendation of qualification. In using such a statement in the setting of our deliberations and reasonings we shall generally remain on safe ground and only rarely fall into error.

2. RELIABILITY AND PROBABILITY

While reliability does not ensure truth, it does generally yield high probability. The statement that “Our lottery ticket will not win” is highly reliable—and is so exactly because it is so probable.

Reliability is thus closely interlinked with probability. It is very unlikely that a five digit lottery yield 1-1-1-1-1. And so most applications using the premiss that the outcome differs from 11111 will be true. But of course this sort of thing will not always hold—there had to be some particular outcome. Like probability itself, reliability does guarantee truth.

Thus take an Agatha Christie-like murder situation—someone stabbed the Colonel to death in the Library. We can reliably say that it was not the butler, or the visiting nephew—and so on for every single individual in the house. But of course one of these otherwise reliable statements must be false.

Consider the contention: “No lottery ticket whatsoever will win.” This is clearly and decidedly false. But most of its particular applications and implementations—its bearing in relation to this or that particular ticket will yield true inferences. And is circumstance endows that false generalization itself with reliability. And so even when we rely on falsehoods matters may well work out alright in many sorts of situations.

3. RELIABILITY AS A USEFUL INSTRUMENT OF PRACTICAL REASONING

Reliability is a concept of practical (applicative) rather than strictly theoretical (fact-coordinate) reason. Its core lies in the fact that the application and implementation of reliable statements will *generally* be safe.

The value of reliable statements resides in their utility. They extend the range of our ability to reason and answer questions. Granted, here as elsewhere we must pay a price to realize benefits. In this present case the price is the risk of error. But with reliable statements this risk is small and the benefits can potentially be quite sizable.

To be reliable a statement need do no more than to approximate truth—to get things right enough that its acceptance will only seldom lead to error. And this circumstance has significant implications. Inquiry and investigation would be far more difficult and distressing projects if we lived in circumstances that were not cognitively user-friendly in that only by reasoning from the exact and unqualified truths could true conclusions be accessible to us. If our cognitive situation were such that imprecision and inexactness were decisive barriers to the realization of truth, intelligent beings whose actions in the world are grounded in their thought about things would have a much harder time of it. Indeed their capacity to emerge and thrive would be fatally compromised.