

Truth

In this essay I will present the view that the minimalist conception of truth is the most accurate and unproblematic of the theories I have come across. In order to display this, in section one I will present the most intuitive of the theories of truth, the Correspondence Theory, before arguing against it in section two. In my third section I will demonstrate how Correspondence Theory evolved into the Coherence Theory of Truth. In my fourth section I will argue that this thesis is also flawed, before presenting, in section five, the Minimalist Theory. I will discuss this in detail, in so doing proposing several problems for it and arguing that it overcomes these. In my final section I will present a criticism designed to show the theory to be inherently flawed, before arguing that this criticism fails and minimalism survives.

1. Correspondence Theories

The most intuitive definition of truth is the correspondence theory. This is a theory that “takes the truth of a proposition to consist... in its relation to the world, its correspondence to the facts.”¹ For example, the proposition that ‘Snow is white’ is made true by the correspondence of the proposition ‘Snow is white’ to the fact that snow is white. Thus, truth is a relation between propositions and states of affairs obtaining in the world.

Versions of this theory have been upheld by both Russell² and Wittgenstein³. Given our initial description of the theory, it is clear that we need to further define the terms we are using – primarily, we need to define what is meant by a proposition. Wittgenstein presents the view that a complex molecular proposition is composed out of atomic propositions. For example, the general molecular

¹ Haak, *Philosophy of Logics*

² Russell, 1918

³ Wittgenstein, 1922

proposition $(Fa \vee Gb)$ is composed out of the atomic propositions 'Fa' and 'Gb'. The world consists of combinations of logical atoms, which, arranged in various ways, are facts. In the perfect language that Wittgenstein sought the arrangements of words that formed true atomic propositions would mirror the arrangements of logical atoms in the world. Thus, the 'correspondence' between propositions and the world lies in what Haak refers to as this "structural isomorphism". Having clarified what it is for atomic propositions to correspond to logical atoms – and thus what it is for atomic propositions to be true - one can give the truth conditions of molecular propositions. For example, $(p \vee q)$ will be true iff either 'p' is true or 'q' is true, $\neg p$ will be true just in case 'p' is not true, etc. Russell supplemented Wittgenstein's theory by defining logical atoms to be sense data – and thus to be the objects of direct perception. A proposition's meaning is thus derived from its composition of names of these objects of direct perception.

2. Problems with Correspondence Theory

Whilst Wittgenstein and Russell have done much to clarify the details of what corresponds to what (i.e. what it is in language that corresponds to the world and what it is in the world that language corresponds to) they have not managed to adequately clarify the notion of correspondence. This is seen by many to be the central fault of any version of correspondence theory, and applies even to those situations that one might expect correspondence theory to deal with most easily. For example, if we consider that case:

Proposition: The dog is to the left of the cat

And the corresponding fact:



We find that whilst the fact has only two components, the proposition has at least three. This disparity seems to deny structural isomorphism between facts and propositions. This structural isomorphism is “intimately connected with both the theory about the ultimate structure of the world and the ideal of a perfectly perspicuous language.” Thus, in the rejection of this structural isomorphism we must also reject correspondence theories.

3. Coherence Theories.

Whilst coherence theories of truth are rivals to correspondence theories the former were also initially derived from the latter. As the logical positivists grappled with some epistemological problems created by Wittgenstein’s correspondence theory, they sought a test to determine whether a sentence corresponds to fact. Carnap and Schlick settled upon statements reporting immediate sense experience as the basis for this test. They decided that such statements are incorrigible. If one perceives a roughly round red blob then it is certain that one is perceiving a roughly round red blob, even if this perception does not correlate to any external object. Therefore, statements of such perceptions must be incorrigible. Thus, these statements can form a basis for testing the truth of other statements – by their logical relations to each other.

Once this test has been introduced as a means of verifying statements the theory can no longer accurately be described as a strict correspondence theory. Proponents of this modified theory now deny that truth lies in the direct relation between propositions and the world. Instead they argue that, in the case of all but

perceptual statements, a statement's truth derives from its relation to other statements.

It may be argued that, according to this theory, a proposition's truth still ultimately lies in its relation to the world (albeit indirectly). However, given Neurath's subsequent rejection of the notion that even perceptual beliefs may be entirely incorrigible, the coherence theorists settled upon the sole test of truth being the relation of beliefs to each other. This creates the very Quinian idea of our quest for knowledge consisting of a constant process of readjusting our "web of beliefs" in order for it to form a set which is both comprehensive in its range and consistent in its internal structure.⁴

4. Problems with Coherence Theories of Truth

A central problem facing coherence theory is that it is not clear that there is a unique set of coherent beliefs. It is conceivable that one could imagine a science fiction type world which is internally coherent but that bears little relation to the true world.

Rescher builds upon this problem by suggesting that the coherentist will struggle to discern a privileged set of data from the incoherent and inconsistent we could form beliefs from.⁵ He proposes that this problem can be solved by introducing the idea of a 'maximal consistent subset' (M.C.S.). S' is a an M.C.S. of S if S' is a non-empty subset of S to which is consistent and to which no additional member of the set S can be added without generating an inconsistency.

⁴ Quine, *Two Dogmas of Empiricism*

⁵ Rescher, *The Coherence Theory of Truth*

However, there may well be more than one M.C.S. for a given set of data and thus we need some method of privileging one M.C.S. over the others – or else the problem of a ‘science fiction’ type M.C.S. remains. Rescher therefore proposes that we introduce a ‘plausibility index’ by which we can filter possible M.C.S.s to single out the unique M.C.S. that is true. This plausibility index allows us to divide data sets into those which are and those which are not plausible.

I believe there are three potential problems with this process. Firstly, it is not clear that this process will enable us to single out one M.C.S. that is privileged above the others. Secondly, there can be no way of selecting and justifying the standards from which the plausibility index is constructed. These must surely be justified from a coherence theory perspective, and cannot simply be a means of privileging the M.C.S. that is most similar to our current web of belief. It is far from obvious that such a selection procedure exists. Thirdly, the process Rescher describes only allows us to select an M.C.S. from a pre-existing data set. It does not allow for the addition of entirely new data to an already existing data set.

This final problem, suggested by Haak⁶, is surmountable if a new M.C.S. is selected whenever new items of data are added to the set of possible data. Indeed, this process seems to be an accurate description of the scientific methodology – which is ideally a continuous movement towards a more consistent and comprehensive data set – as we readjust the accepted body of scientific theory whenever new data emerges that conflicts with old theory – this is perhaps described most radically and obviously by Kuhn in his theory of ‘paradigm shift’.⁷

However, these are not the only problems faced by a better explicated version of correspondence theory. Just as I found correspondence theories to be

⁶ Haak, *Ibid*

⁷ Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*

inadequate in their explication of the notion of correspondence, I believe coherence theories to lack suitable precision and clarity in the explication of their theories. This lack of clarity applies to several aspects of the theory. Perhaps the most important area of vagueness surround the idea of 'coherence'. It is not specified what the appropriate relation between two beliefs must be in order for them to be 'coherent'. Without a precise definition of what type of relation creates coherence the theory is, at best, impractical and incomplete.

5. Deflationist Theories of Truth

Deflationist theories of truth are fundamentally different from either of the theories so far examined. Crispin Wright describes the deflationist dogma as consisting in "the proposal that correspondence, coherentist, pragmatist, and even indefinabilist conceptions of truth all err in their common conviction that 'true' presents a substantial concept at all."⁸ Deflationism is, therefore, the theory that there is no general thing that truth *is*. Proponents of this theory deny that for a proposition to be true is for it to have some general underlying nature that is suitable for analysis. Consequently, they deny that one can "specify, at least roughly, the conditions necessary and sufficient for something to be true."⁹

We must be clear that, although I have so far presented the theory in purely negative terms, the deflationist account does have some positive things to say about truth. A concept common to all theories of truth is that one can infer

The belief that *the cat is on the mat* is true
from

⁸ Wright, *Truth: A Traditional Debate Reviewed*

⁹ Horwich, *The Minimalist Conception of Truth*

The cat is on the mat

and vice versa. More generally, deflationists accept all instances of 'The belief (supposition, assertion, etc) *that p* is true iff *p*'. This is referred to as the 'truth schemata'. The deflationist believes that no further analysis of truth is necessary as the truth schemata accounts for all instances of our use of the truth predicate – and so adequately defines it.

Deflationism is closely connected to Ramsey's 'redundancy theory'. This is the theory that 'The proposition *that p* is true' is identical in meaning to '*p*'. Therefore, the concept of truth is redundant – to state that a proposition 'is true' is actually to say nothing more than simply stating the proposition.

However, proponents of deflationism claim that their theory improves upon redundancy theories in a number of ways. Horwich develops his version of deflationism (which he refers to as 'minimalism') in such a way as to avoid several criticisms that have been levelled at more general deflationist theories, including redundancy theories. It is Horwich's minimalist version of deflationism that I shall be focussing on.

It has been suggested that if truth really was redundant we would not have such a concept. Whilst I do not agree that this is necessarily true, I do believe that the redundancy theorist must provide good reason for the existence of the concept of truth if they maintain that it has no use. Redundancy theorists do not provide such an explanation and this is a weakness of their theory. Contrastingly, minimalists propose that the truth predicate allows us to make generalisations.¹⁰ Whilst the truth predicate is not necessary in order to make generalisations such as

¹⁰ Quine, *Philosophy of Logic*

The earth is subject to gravity
to

Every physical object is subject to gravity

we find that not all generalisations can be so easily made. For example, how can we generalise the statement

Physicists would like to *believe* that there are black holes only if there *are* black holes.¹¹

Here, we use our conception of truth to convert each proposition into an equivalent one – one that can no be generalised in the normal fashion.

e.g. p

is equivalent to

The statement *that p* is true

and also equivalent to

The belief *that p* is true.

Therefore we can generalise

Physicists would like to believe *that there are black holes* only if the belief *that there are black hole* is true

¹¹ Horwich, *Ibid*

to

Every statement of the form 'If p, then p' is true

and

Physicists would like to believe only what is true.

Thus, we see that the truth predicate is not redundant, and that deflationist theories – in this instance, minimalist theories specifically – are able to apply the truth predicate without compromising the thesis that the predicate has no underlying nature.

Having argued that a minimalist account of truth is superior to a redundancy account, avoiding many of the problems faced by the latter thesis, we can move on to discuss minimalism in more depth. Given that the minimalists make far weaker claims about the nature of truth than many other theorists, it must be shown that minimalism adequately captures, or at least gives an adequate account of, our concept of truth. Horwich contends that the defining feature of truth is “our tendency to infer instances of ‘The proposition *that p* is true’ from corresponding instances of ‘*p*’ and vice versa”.¹²

The criticism of this feature of minimalism with perhaps the greatest capacity for damage is made by Richard¹³. He claims that minimalism is mistaken in asserting that the concept of truth is “fixed by our disposition to accept instances of the truth schemata”. This, claims Richard, is demonstrable through the difficulty of applying the truth schemata to non-factual statements – e.g. those containing empty names (e.g. ‘The King of France is bald’ – this cannot be taken to imply ‘The statement *that the King of France is Bald* is true.’)

¹² Horwich, *Ibid*

¹³ Richard, *Deflating Truth*

However, one may maintain that the essence of minimalism is to fix our concept of truth through certain uncontroversial schemata and that there is no underlying definition of the concept. Therefore, although this criticism may target this particular conception of minimalism, it does not damage the thesis as a whole. One may avoid the criticism by simply reformulating the schemata to avoid such counterexamples – or even by applying the original schemata to uncontroversial schemata and applying another to such problematic examples.

6. Problems with Minimalism.

It has been proposed that the process of defining truth at all – even to the limited extent of the minimalist project – is doomed to failure. Davidson suggests that the same things that makes the concept of truth so important – its elementary and fundamental nature – “also foreclose on the possibility of finding a foundation for them which reaches deeper into bedrock.”¹⁴ Truth, maintains Davidson, is an indefinable concept. This idea may seem to be very much in line with the deflationist theory discussed above. However, Davidson rejects this, making efforts to criticise Horwich’s theory.

His central criticism focuses upon Horwich’s conviction that we can understand concepts such as meaning – or any of the propositional attitudes – independently of our understanding of truth. Davidson disputes this. Horwich seeks, primarily, to attribute truth to propositions. However, Davidson maintains that in order to explain how truth can be predicated of sentences and utterances, the minimalist must explain meaning without reference to truth – lest he compromise the independence of the term. Horwich therefore proposes that understanding a sentence does not consist in knowing its truth conditions (though such

¹⁴ Davidson, *The Folly of Trying to Define Truth*

knowledge is often sufficient for understanding a sentence). The necessary conditions for understanding a sentence rather lie in knowing the conditions for its proper use.

I do not see how Davidson believes his criticism to be especially damaging or relevant to Horwich's theory, and reject his assertion that Horwich is "brief, even laconic" on this matter. I believe Horwich's lack of detail here is due to the minor, even irrelevant nature of Davidson's point. Surely the simplest rebuttal to Davidson would be that truth is only attributed to propositions, and that sentences simply express these propositions. Truth is not, therefore predicated to sentences, but rather to the propositions that they express.

Given this rejection of Davidson's rather weak criticism of minimalism I propose this to be the most accurate description of the phenomenon of truth. It avoids many of the problems faced by coherence and correspondence theories, whilst surpassing the problems faced by redundancy theories.