

# Primitivism about Truth

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## 1. Introduction

Some theories of truth aim to give an analysis of it in terms of further notions such as correspondence, coherence, or warrant. Some theories of truth aim to deflate its philosophical significance. The form of primitivism that I defend rejects both approaches. It takes truth to be a primitive, fundamental concept. In other words, the concept of truth cannot be defined, reduced, or analyzed into concepts that are themselves more basic or fundamental than truth. But that is not to say that truth is philosophically insignificant. Primitivism takes truth to be unanalyzable, but of paramount philosophical and explanatory significance.

Primitivism, in some form or other, is analytic philosophy's first theory of truth. "What true is," writes Frege, "I hold to be indefinable" (1979: 174). G. E. Moore said the same thing about truth that he more famously said about the good: "truth is itself a simple concept" (1899: 182). For a time, Bertrand Russell also embraced a primitivist perspective, which he understood as the belief that "Truth and falsehood [...] are ultimate, and no account can be given of what makes a proposition true or false" (1906-1907: 49). Given the century's worth of debate, insight, and argument about the nature of truth that followed these early statements of primitivism, we are now in a position to give a more precise characterization and defense of the primitivist theory of truth. My goal in this chapter is to offer what I take to be the most perspicuous statement and defense of primitivism.<sup>1</sup>

I begin by identifying the form of primitivism that I find the most defensible, which I accomplish by way of continual reference to the distinctions between concepts and properties, and between substantive and deflationary views about truth. Then I present some of the arguments

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<sup>1</sup> I offer a more thorough history and defense of primitivism in Asay 2013.

that favor primitivism. I conclude by answering some familiar objections that have been lodged against the view.

## 2. What is primitivism?

The primitivism I defend is that the concept of truth is fundamental: it is an explanatorily indispensable concept that cannot be defined, analyzed, or otherwise explicated in terms of concepts that are still more fundamental. This analysis relies on three notions or distinctions: (1) concepts (as opposed to properties), (2) fundamentality relations between concepts, and (3) a distinction between explanatorily indispensable and dispensable concepts. I examine these three in turn.

The first key to understanding primitivism is the distinction between the *concept* and *property* of truth (hereafter, respectively, ‘TRUTH’ and ‘*truth*’). Whatever else they are, concepts are the tools our minds use to think and communicate. The range of thoughts we can think and express is a function of the concepts we possess. Understanding the nature of these concepts and how they relate to one another is one traditional project of philosophy. One way of better understanding one’s mind is by better understanding the concepts under its employ. Properties, whatever else they are, are the (typically shared) features that belong to objects. Properties are the ways that objects are. My belief that puffins possess colorful beaks has the property of being true; the sentence ‘Pangolins founded the Smithsonian’ does not.

When I say that truth is primitive, I am referring to TRUTH, not *truth*. On my view, to say that the property *truth* is primitive is to say that it is a metaphysically basic property, something akin to how we might think about *electric charge* in physics. If truth-bearers (whether they be sentences, beliefs, propositions, or all of the above) are true in virtue of possessing a fundamental property *truth*, then there is no further question as to why a truth-bearer is true, or what makes it true. ‘Some penguins live in Australia’, on this view, is true because it possesses a particular fundamental property, not because of the existence of the flightless birds that live on Kangaroo Island, or because the sentence expresses a proposition that corresponds to some fact or obtaining state of affairs. One way to think about this view is that it makes the matter of which truth-bearers are true brute: there is no explanation to be given of why some sentences are true, and others false, save for their possession of these two fundamental properties of the universe, *truth* and *falsity*. I know of no philosopher who both carefully distinguishes between concepts and properties and

endorses the primitiveness of *truth*.<sup>2</sup> Doing so renders the matter of which truth-bearers are true a massive metaphysical mystery.

The issue of whether *truth* is a fundamental property is a separate matter from the issue of whether TRUTH is a fundamental concept. To say that TRUTH is fundamental is to say that it cannot be defined, analyzed, or reduced in terms of further concepts that are still more fundamental. My characterization of primitivism is therefore committed to some notion of fundamentality that obtains between concepts. The basic idea I have in mind here is that concepts stand in a hierarchical structure, with some concepts—the primitive ones—located at the ground level. To possess concepts at the higher, more derivative, levels, one must already possess the concepts connected to them at the lower levels of the structure. Concepts are more fundamental the lower on the hierarchy they stand. For example, the concept BACHELOR is derivative, as it's defined in terms of the further concepts MALE and UNMARRIED (which are themselves, presumably, dependent on still more fundamental concepts). One can possess the latter two concepts without possessing the first, but not vice versa. To say that TRUTH is primitive, then, is to say that there is no concept that is more fundamental than it. Possession of TRUTH does not require possession of any other concept (such as CORRESPONDENCE or COHERENCE, say), though possessing TRUTH may well be necessary for possessing all sorts of other concepts (such as BELIEF, KNOWLEDGE, MEANING, etc.), if those concepts are defined in terms of TRUTH. There may be other concepts that are maximally fundamental, alongside TRUTH. Whether these concepts are themselves interconnected (as in Strawson 1992) or better thought of as independent conceptual “atoms” is a further question; the primitivist claim is simply that TRUTH is a member of the most fundamental set of concepts.

My characterization of primitivism is not just that TRUTH is fundamental, but that it is explanatorily indispensable. In saying so, I emphasize that primitivism is a substantive, non-deflationary theory of truth. Deflationists with respect to the concept TRUTH hold that the concept fundamentally has an expressive purpose rather than an explanatory one (Horwich 1990, Williams 1999).<sup>3</sup> We can elucidate this idea in a variety of ways. A common theme in deflationist thinking

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<sup>2</sup> Several do the latter without doing the former. Among them are Moore and Russell, as well as contemporary writers such as McGinn (2000) and Merricks (2007).

<sup>3</sup> Given the distinction between concepts and properties, deflationism about the property *truth* is a separate matter. I defend metaphysical deflationism, understood as the view that *truth* is a merely abundant property (Asay 2014). That is, *truth* is not a metaphysically significant property that accounts for the genuine resemblances between objects, the causal goings-on in the world, and what makes truth-bearers true. One can take TRUTH to be an indispensable component of our conceptual repertoire without also supposing it to correspond to some metaphysically significant

is that we have words like ‘true’ in our language not to give us the ability to express a special class of ideas involving truth, but rather to facilitate our expression of thoughts that have nothing to do with truth. To say that it’s true that dodos have gone extinct is just another way of expressing the idea that dodos have gone extinct. To say that not everything Freddo says is true is just a more convenient way of saying either that Freddo said that frogs are mammals (though frogs aren’t mammals), or Freddo said that aquariums are tools of oppression (though aquariums aren’t tools of oppression), and so on. ‘True’, in other words, adds *convenience* rather than *content* to our language.

Another aspect of the conceptually deflationary view is that TRUTH doesn’t stand in any explanatorily significant relationships to other concepts. Consider the connection between KNOWLEDGE and TRUTH: S knows that  $p$  only if  $p$  is true. Truth is a necessary ingredient of knowledge. But this doesn’t show that the relationship between the two concepts is explanatorily significant. The reason why is that the connection between knowledge and truth merely illustrates the expressive utility of truth, and nothing more. What it is to say that knowledge requires truth is just: Someone knows that snow is white only if snow is white, and someone knows that snow is soft only if snow is soft, and someone knows that snow is solid only if snow is solid, and so forth. It’s *true* to say that knowledge and truth are connected, but saying so is no concession to substantivism about TRUTH.

Contrast the epistemological case with how Davidson, another advocate of primitivism, approaches the concept of meaning. He writes: “while Tarski intended to analyse the concept of truth by appealing (in Convention T) to the concept of meaning (in the guise of sameness of meaning, or translation), I have the reverse in mind. I considered truth to be the central primitive concept, and hoped, by detailing truth’s structure, to get at meaning” (1984: xiv). Davidson is here committing to the view that the concepts TRUTH and MEANING are explanatorily connected, with the latter being dependent upon the former. A Davidsonian theory of meaning does not appeal to truth simply as a device that enables more convenient expression. Rather, it takes it as a theoretical primitive that we must presuppose if we are to understand the nature of linguistic meaning. Deflationists deny that TRUTH is related to other concepts in this way.

The theoretical purpose of allowing something into one’s stock of primitives is to put it to work in one’s theorizing. So it would be odd to combine the views that truth is conceptually primitive, but explanatorily bankrupt. The primitivism that I endorse accepts, alongside Davidson, that truth does enjoy rich conceptual connections to other significant notions. Start analyzing notions like knowledge, belief, assertion, conjecture, meaning, pretense, sincerity, etc., and it won’t

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property. Indeed, one purpose of drawing the distinction between concepts and properties is to enable a subtler appreciation of the various ways in which truth is or isn’t deflationary.

be long until one starts appealing to truth in order to explicate these other concepts. Now, that there are such connections does not automatically reveal that the links are explanatorily significant (as with the case of knowledge above). But it's important to note that when the connections do appear to be significant, primitivists, unlike deflationists, can accept the appearances at face value. Deflationists labor under the burden of revealing how all connections between truth and other notions are simply due to truth's expressive conveniences. (This is one major goal of Horwich 1990.) By contrast, primitivists welcome the discovery of substantive connections between TRUTH and other concepts, as this is exactly what we should expect from one of our bedrock, most fundamental concepts.

### **3. Arguments for primitivism**

There are a variety of ways that one might go about defending the claim that TRUTH is primitive. In this section I survey a number of such arguments, in ascending order of what I take to be their philosophical significance.

#### **3.1. Elimination**

One straightforward way of defending primitivism is by way of elimination. If one can show that all the other theories of truth are defective, then perhaps we can settle for primitivism. This might be the route of choice for those who, like Horwich, believe primitivism to be "perhaps the least attractive conclusion" in the theory of truth, a view that "can be the resort only of those who feel that the decent alternatives have been exhausted" (1990: 10). I do not share this pessimistic view, and thus prefer arguments that speak to the independent plausibility of primitivism. Still, there is no shortage of dissatisfaction with the more familiar theories of truth. Many purported definitions of truth are thought to be subject to counterexample. Some belief could be a part of a maximally coherent worldview and yet be false; some belief could be incredibly useful, or find a home within some finalized scientific theory, and yet be false. If such things are possible, then truth cannot be analyzed in these sorts of coherentist or pragmatist ways. A familiar charge from alethic pluralists is that even the correspondence theory is subject to counterexample: there are no facts, for example, to which mathematical and moral truths correspond (Lynch 2009). Furthermore, if notions such as coherence, correspondence, utility, or finalized science are articulated in a way that avoids the counterexamples, there lingers a suspicion that these refined notions avoid the counterexamples only by covertly smuggling in the concept of truth. Such is Russell's critique of coherentism: it can't render 'true' and 'coherent' necessarily coextensive without presupposing "a more usual meaning of truth and falsehood in constructing its coherent

whole, and that this more usual meaning, though indispensable to the theory, cannot be explained by means of the theory” (1906-1907: 33). Douglas Patterson also adopts this line of critique, arguing that the familiar theories of truth attain extensional adequacy only at the expense of circularity (2010).

The elimination strategy also needs to take account of pluralist and deflationary theories, offering compelling objections against them that do not in turn apply to primitivists. I believe there are such objections (I offer them against deflationists and pluralists in, respectively, Asay 2013 and Asay (forthcoming)), but I will not address them here, since I think the elimination strategy is of limited dialectical value. It’s better to focus on arguments that don’t treat primitivism as a view of last resort.

### **3.2. Foundationalism**

One direct argument for primitivism begins with the fact that some concepts need to be primitive and suggests that it’s plausible to take truth to be such a concept. Davidson succinctly captures the sentiment of this argument, claiming that truth is “as clear and basic a concept as we have [...] Why on earth should we expect to be able to reduce truth to something clearer or more fundamental?” (1990: 135-136). The argument closely mirrors foundationalist arguments in epistemology, which aim to establish that there must be basic beliefs that are the source of all further justification.

Primitivism presupposes that concepts stand in dependency relationships with one another. The concept BACHELOR depends on the concepts MALE and UNMARRIED, and so is not itself primitive. What of the concepts on which it depends? The concept UNMARRIED seems to depend on the concept MARRIAGE. So what about MARRIAGE? It seems that there are three possibilities: (1) it doesn’t depend on any further concept, and so is primitive; (2) it depends on further concepts yet to be mentioned; (3) it depends on concepts already mentioned, such as BACHELOR.

Option (3) is traditionally taken to be problematic, as it proves these conceptual dependencies to run in a circle. If the dependency at issue is transitive (such that if A depends upon B, and B depends upon C, then A depends upon C) and irreflexive (such that if A depends upon B, then B doesn’t depend upon A), then we can’t have conceptual circles like this. If BACHELOR depends on UNMARRIED, and UNMARRIED depends on MARRIAGE, then BACHELOR depends on MARRIAGE. But if BACHELOR depends on MARRIAGE, then MARRIAGE doesn’t depend on BACHELOR. So option (3) is ruled out. Option (1) seems implausible, since we can account for MARRIAGE in terms of the politically recognized unions that constitute it; MARRIAGE is hardly a

contender for conceptual bedrock. So that leaves option (2), and the question of fundamentality arises for those further concepts, whatever they turn out to be: are they fundamental, or still further analyzable? Presumably we cannot take option (2) forever—that would be to instigate an infinite regress of concepts, each one more fundamental than the next. Eventually, then, we must take option (1) for some concepts. If there are to be no infinite regresses or conceptual circles, we must eventually land on some conceptual primitives.

Having established that there are conceptual primitives, we now need to consider what we should expect them to be like. Here are a few suggestions. The primitive concepts are the ones that we need in order to have other concepts. So we should expect the primitive concepts to be ones that are highly general and of wide application. In logic, the idea of topic neutrality is often invoked to capture what is distinctive about logical concepts: notions like conjunction, disjunction, and the like aren't *about* any specific domain of thought. They apply, in virtue of their generality, across all domains of thought. The same is true of truth. Any domain of thought, where thought is taken to involve the contemplation and expression of truth-evaluable contents, is a domain where truth is relevant. In fact, the idea that truth is a logical property, rather than a naturalistic or metaphysical property, is a familiar one (e.g., Horwich 1990: 38). Concepts that are limited to only certain domains of thought are less likely to be paradigm cases of primitive concepts. Truth, by way of its generality, is a strong contender for such status.

Given their foundational nature, we should also expect primitive concepts to be connected to a large number of derivative concepts. After all, the function of the foundational concepts, taken together, is to provide a basis for understanding the nature of all concepts whatsoever. The fact that TRUTH shares conceptual connections with so many other concepts is yet another indicator that it deserves a spot amongst the most fundamental concepts. As already noted, truth is not far from our explorations of many other topics. What is knowledge? The right kind of possession of the truth. What is assertion? Putting forward one's thoughts as being true. What is the meaning of a sentence? The conditions under which it is true. What is a belief? A representational mental state whose aim is the truth. What is the aim of science? Achieving the truth. Again, primitivism may not be necessary in order to explain all these various conceptual connections; some of them (but not all) are open to straightforward deflationary analysis.<sup>4</sup> The present point is that we should expect our conceptual foundations to reveal themselves all over our conceptual scheme, and that is precisely what we find with TRUTH.

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<sup>4</sup> See Bar-On and Simmons 2007 for an argument that deflationists cannot account for the relationship between truth and assertion.

### 3.3. Omnipresence

I now want to turn to one final argument for primitivism. I call it the *omnipresence* argument, and I take my inspiration for it from Frege. The basic idea is that TRUTH forms part of the structure of every propositional thought—it is thus omnipresent in all our thoughts. But if so, then any attempt to define truth must make use of judgments that already employ truth. So any purported definition of truth is circular. Hence, truth cannot be analyzed in terms of more basic concepts.

As I shall explain, I take the omnipresence argument to be a metaphysical counterpart to an epistemologically focused argument that Frege offers. In his essay “The Thought”, Frege presents an argument to the conclusion that truth cannot be defined. It begins as a refutation of the correspondence theory, then generalizes:

Can it not be laid down that truth exists when there is correspondence in a certain respect? But in which? For what would we then have to do to decide whether something were true? We should have to inquire whether it were true that an idea and a reality, perhaps, corresponded in the laid-down respect. And then we should be confronted by a question of the same kind and the game could begin again. So the attempt to explain truth as correspondence collapses. And every other attempt to define truth collapses too. For in a definition certain characteristics would have to be stated. And in application to any particular case the question would always arise whether it were true that the characteristics were present. So one goes round in a circle. Consequently, it is probable that the content of the word “true” is unique and undefinable. (1956: 291)

The argument can be viewed either as uncovering a vicious circularity or vicious regress. If truth consists in some further characteristics, then to determine whether or not something is true, we have to determine whether or not it has those further characteristics. But the new investigation is just an investigation into whether it’s true that the candidate truth has those further characteristics. So our investigation into truth by means of the further characteristics leads us to another investigation into truth. We can continue that investigation in terms of the same further characteristics, but the question will keep coming back to truth. Of course, we know plenty about the world, and which truth-bearers are true. This knowledge would seem to be impossible, Frege is arguing, if truth were definable.

For Frege, “Predicating [truth] is always included in predicating anything whatever” (1979: 236). So ‘is true’ can’t be analyzed in terms of other predicates since those predicates are already intertwined with truth. Predicating ‘is a mammal’ of Elijah the echidna just is to predicate ‘is true’



of ‘Elijah the echidna is a mammal’. This insight is key to appreciating primitivism, but I think Frege unhelpfully casts the idea in epistemic terms in his argument. There are two epistemic assumptions underlying the argument, and I suspect that both are false.

Frege’s first assumption in the argument is that epistemic priority follows conceptual priority. That is to say, if some concept  $C$  is analyzed in terms of concept  $A$ , then the means of determining whether  $C$  applies to something is determining whether  $A$  applies to it. So if truth is analyzed in terms of correspondence with fact, then to determine whether something is true one must first determine whether it corresponds with fact. As a general epistemic principle, this sort of priority cannot be correct. Suppose I want to know if Ms. Marzipan is married. I’m not sure exactly how to analyze the concept MARRIAGE, but I know one way of completing the epistemic chore at hand: ask Marzipan. I can learn from testimony whether or not ‘is married’ applies to Marzipan; the question of which concepts constitute MARRIAGE is beside the point, epistemically speaking. There are plenty of weaker claims we can make. If truth really is defined by correspondence to fact, then in learning that something is true, one thereby can come to know that something corresponds to the facts. And vice versa. In fact, this epistemic symmetry is what gives the lie to the stronger priority claim that we must learn which concepts apply to something by means of those concepts’ analysis. But the stronger claim is needed to generate the vicious regress that Frege intends: to learn that  $p$  is true, we have to learn that  $p$  is  $A$ , and that means learning that it’s true that  $p$  is  $A$ , and to learn that we have to learn that it’s  $A$  that  $p$  is  $A$ , which just is to learn that it’s true that it’s  $A$  that  $p$  is  $A$ , and so on. My present point is that whatever the means are by which we learn any of these claims on the regress, we thereby enable ourselves to learn all of them. And the way we learn that  $p$  is true need not have anything to do with  $A$  at all. (We can just ask a reliable source about  $p$ .)

The second false assumption involves an even less plausible form of epistemic priority. So even if we granted Frege’s first assumption—that we come to know whether a concept applies by coming to know whether the concept’s constituents apply—it would not help him complete the argument. The following is an example of the kind of regress that Frege deploys:

- (1) ‘Elijah is an echidna’ is true
  - (2) ‘Elijah is an echidna’ corresponds with the facts.
  - (3) “‘Elijah is an echidna’ corresponds with the facts’ is true.
  - (4) “‘Elijah is an echidna’ corresponds with the facts’ corresponds with the facts.
  - (5) ““‘Elijah is an echidna’ corresponds with the facts’ corresponds with the facts’ is true.
- ...

Frege's first assumption about epistemic priority is that (2) is prior to (1). (2) provides an analysis of (1), and so takes epistemic precedent. So to come to know (1), one must first come to know (2). But: the regress must keep going for the argument to be successful. To come to know (2), one must first come to know (3), and so on. The question facing Frege is why (3) ought to come before (2), just as (2) comes before (1). It's true that (2) is true if and only if (3) is true. But what Frege needs to establish is that (3) is epistemically prior to (2). But that is independently implausible, *even if* Frege is right that (2) comes before (1). Put another way: the epistemic priority that would allow (2) to come before (1) is not the kind of priority that would allow him to infer that (3) comes before (2). Neither purported priority is particularly plausible.

Here's another way of appreciating the point. (1) and (2) can be thought of as being "joined together" by means of the biconditional schema:

‘*p*’ is true if and only if ‘*p*’ corresponds with the facts.

Of course, the connection between truth and correspondence (according to correspondence theorists) is not merely material equivalence. Correspondence reveals the nature of truth, and thus Frege takes the right-hand side to be epistemically prior. I have questioned the legitimacy of that inference, but it's easy to appreciate why one might appeal to it. But now consider how (2) and (3) are connected. What joins them together is different; it's the familiar truth schema:

‘*p*’ is true if and only if *p*.

To launch the epistemic regress, Frege now needs the left-hand side (e.g., (3)) to be epistemically prior to the right-hand side (e.g., (2)). Even if it exists (which I have already doubted), the epistemic priority of CORRESPONDENCE WITH FACT over TRUTH does nothing to justify the epistemic priority of “‘*p*’ is true” over ‘*p*’. If anything, claims that *p* would seem to be more conceptually basic than claims that ‘*p*’ is true. The latter carries the same conceptual content of ‘*p*’, plus seemingly more. Hence, even if (2) must come before (1), and (4) must come before (3), it doesn't follow that (3) must come before (2), and (5) before (4).

Despite these objections, which I take to be conclusive against Frege's argument, I believe that there is a nearby argument that does establish primitivism. Suppose that Frege is right in the general idea that predications of truth are always, in some sense, present whenever predications take place. One explanation of that fact is that truth is already a part of every act of predication. And indeed, this thought informs Frege's logical notation. That notation employs the “horizontal”

stroke, which, according to Künne, “can be read as the predicate ‘is identical with the True’” (2008: 34). Frege employs the horizontal to demonstrate his commitment to omnipresence: “Each and every ideographic sentence begins with the horizontal, so each and every ideographic sentence contains a truth-predicate in the guise of ‘is identical with the True’, and each and every thought expressed by an ideographic sentence is about the truth-value True. So, truth is omnipresent” (Künne 2008: 35).

Here is my understanding of omnipresence. I first suppose that our propositional thoughts are constituted by their component concepts. For me to think the thought that echidnas are mammals, I must have the concepts ECHIDNA and MAMMAL. Sometimes these concepts speak to the *content* of the thought in question: the thought that echidnas are mammals is about echidnas and mammals. But concepts can also contribute to the *structure* of a thought. To think the thought that echidnas are mammals and penguins are fish, one needs the concept CONJUNCTION, although the thought in question is not about conjunction. Omnipresence is the thesis that TRUTH is a structural component of every propositional thought.

Another way of spinning the omnipresence idea is that it’s the concept of truth that enables us to engage in propositional thought. Without a concept of truth, we can’t think in terms of propositions. Concepts are the tools that our minds use to think thoughts, so a concept that is a part of each and every thought is a concept that we must have in order to engage in any particular thought at all. So to advocate omnipresence is to advocate the claim that we must have a concept of truth if we are to engage in propositional thought. That is to say, anyone who asserts, believes, denies, hypothesizes, lies, or pretends must possess TRUTH.

The best evidence for omnipresence comes from Frege’s observation that “nothing is added to the thought by my ascribing to it the property of truth” (1956: 293). Contemplate the thought that the United States and Canada will merge in 2076. Now contemplate the thought that it’s true that the United States and Canada will merge in 2076. There is no difference between these imaginings. Suppose a mathematician commits to the claim that there is no set whose cardinality is strictly between that of the integers and the real numbers; this mathematician is also committed to the claim that it’s true that there is no set whose cardinality is strictly between that of the integers and the real numbers. If I believe that pigeons outnumber puffins in Paraguay, then it’s true to say of me that I believe that it’s true that pigeons outnumber puffins in Paraguay. One way to capture all these observations is to claim that the sentence forms ‘ $p$ ’ and ‘It is true that  $p$ ’ express the same thing. The reason that “adding” truth to our thoughts adds nothing is that truth is *already there*.

According to this perspective, TRUTH is at the forefront of our propositional thought. This should not be all that surprising. What are we *doing* when we engage in propositional thought?

We're engaging the truth. Propositions are the truth-apt contents of our thought. When we believe or assert a proposition, we're taking a stand on what we take to be true. The difference between an imagistic thought of green grass and a propositional thought that grass is green is that the latter is related to truth. Omnipresence offers an understanding of what it is for a thought to be a *propositional, truth-apt* thought: it involves TRUTH in its structure.

If omnipresence is true, then every propositional thought presupposes TRUTH. Just as all our thoughts about dogs token DOG, all our thoughts about anything whatsoever token TRUTH. So any thought that might purport to define TRUTH already presupposes TRUTH. Thus, any attempt at defining TRUTH is circular. But a circular definition is not a definition in terms of concepts that are more fundamental. So TRUTH is primitive.

#### 4. Objections to primitivism

The most common objections against primitivism about truth fault it for being a form of primitivism. Earlier I cited Horwich's attitude that primitivism is a theory of last resort (1990: 10), a sentiment shared by Künne (2003: 18). The idea behind such a response is that offering an analysis—any analysis—is always better than accepting that no analysis can be offered. This response misses the point I made earlier in connection with the foundationalist argument, namely, that some concepts need to be primitive, lest all conceptual analyses run in circles or launch regresses. So a methodology that always favors analyses is flawed. Furthermore, those offering this sort of objection need an argument as to why TRUTH is a particularly bad candidate for fundamentality. I've argued that it's a particularly good candidate, given its centrality, generality, and topic-neutrality.

Similar objections suggest that accepting that truth is primitive is tantamount to believing that “there is nothing significant to say about truth” (Vision 2004: 45). This claim is a *non-sequitur*. It assumes that the only significant things to say about a concept involve its conceptual analysis. But consider the theoretical role that primitive concepts play: together, they provide the foundations for understanding every other concept we have. In so doing, they provide us an abundance of noteworthy claims. Davidson stresses this fact in his defense of primitivism, showcasing how taking truth to be primitive enables one to take substantive stands on belief, desire, causality, action, and others (1996: 265).

Finally, there is the idea that taking truth to be primitive is to shroud it with “impenetrable mysteriousness” (Horwich 1998: 10). The thought seems to be that we only understand concepts by way of their decomposition, so to fail to analyze is to fail to understand. But this attitude gets the notion of a primitive concept exactly backwards. The primitive concepts are likely to be the

ones most familiar to us, since they are the ones that enable us to have all our other concepts. Merricks successfully refutes this objection, noting that if primitiveness renders a concept mysterious, then it should render all concepts built out of primitives mysterious, thus resulting in *all* concepts being mysterious. Since all concepts aren't mysterious, primitive concepts *qua* primitive concepts aren't mysterious (2007: 185).

This family of objections to TRUTH being primitive relies on false understandings of the nature of primitive concepts and their theoretical role. However, it's worth noting that parallel objections against a primitive *property* of truth may be defensible—I issued such an objection above. Taking the property *truth* to be primitive makes it out to be a fundamental property of a truth-bearer. Its role is to explain why certain objects in the world share a certain property; the primitivist about *truth* says that all truths share this fundamental property, and that's why they're true. One might think that the truth of 'Lemons are sour' and 'Spinach is bitter' has to do with the chemical properties of the foods in question, but this turns out to be incorrect according to the *metaphysical* primitivist about truth. This primitivist view maintains that the truth-values of truth-bearers is a brute, inexplicable matter. In other words, it makes the matter of what's true and what's false metaphysically mysterious.

The better way to object to *conceptual* primitivism about truth is to show how it doesn't pay. Theories justify their sets of fundamentals by showing off what dividends they pay. My view is that primitivism brings with it a treasure trove of theoretical advantages. It avoids the complicated metaphysical commitments that accompany other traditional theories of truth, and is not constantly on the defensive, as deflationists are, trying to show how various alethic phenomena can be accounted for in innocuous, deflationary-friendly ways. The right way to object to primitivism is to admit that we need conceptual primitives, but then show that it's not theoretically lucrative to include TRUTH among them. Sets of fundamental concepts that eschew TRUTH need to be shown to offer significant theoretical advantages. Objections of this form are not easily substantiated, for they involve careful accounting of how competing sets of primitives stack up against each other. They certainly require more sophistication than the casual, brusque dismissals that primitivism more commonly attracts.

## 5. Connections to metaphysics

I have said very little about metaphysics in this essay, and that is for good reason. The primitivism I defend is limited to the concept of truth. Taking there to be a substantial, fundamental metaphysical property of truth is disastrous, as it amounts to saying that there are no informative explanations available as to why truths are true. But what does the conceptual

primitivist have to say about the metaphysical implications of truth? Correspondence theories are often thought to be in service of metaphysical realism, and coherence theories a natural ally to idealist metaphysical systems. Pluralist theories take as their *raison d'être* the hope of demonstrating the different ontological bases for different domains. My conceptual primitivist seems to take on no commitments regarding the metaphysics of truth.

In this respect, conceptual primitivism resembles deflationism. Primitivists, like deflationists, accept that one's theory of truth does not settle the metaphysical question of what provides the grounds for something's being true. Primitivism about TRUTH, after all, is a thesis concerning the cognitive abilities of mental agents, and the relations that must obtain between their various cognitive tools. So primitivists can accept the metaphysically deflationary idea that there is no common, unified, explanation to be found as to why true truth-bearers are true. Roughly put, '*p*' is true because *p*, and '*q*' is true because *q*. What *p* and *q* come to, metaphysically speaking, is a question for metaphysics, and depends upon what '*p*' and '*q*' are about, and what ontological commitments they introduce. What primitivists should reject is that their truth comes to the same thing, like "correspondence with the facts", or what have you.

Primitivism about TRUTH, then, is a fundamentally metaphysically neutral view. It doesn't side with realism or anti-realism; it doesn't reject metaphysics altogether, or embrace it. It does, I believe, rightly hold that metaphysical questions are best separated from the issues that surround the concept of truth. Metaphysical investigation into the grounds of truths is yet another form of inquiry that presupposes TRUTH. Other theories of truth are forced into metaphysically treacherous territory by spreading their ontological commitments across all domains of thought. For example, while correspondence theorists may easily motivate the existence of their corresponding objects (be they facts or something else) for some domains, they are hard-pressed to find available objects in, say, mathematics. This is the "scope problem" familiar from discussions about pluralism (e.g., Lynch 2009). Pluralists respond to the problem by assigning different truth properties to different domains; I respond by rejecting the idea that we need properties of truth at all to account for why truth-bearers are true. Taking TRUTH to be primitive doesn't force one to take this deflationary stance regarding alleged substantive properties of truth, but it does free one up to do so. The right response for those of us who find truth to be of the highest philosophical significance is to identify that idea with the centrality that truth plays in our conceptual scheme.

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