

Primitive Truth

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Abstract

Conceptual primitivism is the view that truth is among our most basic and fundamental concepts. It cannot be defined, analyzed, or reduced into concepts that are more fundamental. Primitivism is opposed to both traditional attempts at defining truth (in terms of correspondence, coherence, or utility) and deflationary theories that argue that the notion of truth is exhausted by means of the truth schema. Though primitivism might be thought of as a view of last resort, I believe that the view is independently attractive, and can be argued for directly. In this paper I offer what I take to be the strongest argument in favor of conceptual primitivism, which relies upon the Fregean doctrine of the omnipresence of truth.

1. Introduction

Conceptual primitivism about truth is the view that truth is among our most basic and fundamental concepts. It cannot be defined, analyzed, or reduced into concepts that are more fundamental. Primitivism is opposed to both traditional attempts at defining truth (in terms of correspondence, coherence, or utility) and deflationary theories that argue that the notion of truth is exhausted by means of the truth schema (i.e., “ p ” is true if and only if p).¹ Though primitivism might be thought of as a view of last resort, an option to be pursued only if all attempts at analysis have failed, I believe that the view is independently attractive, and can be argued for directly. In this paper, I offer what I take to be the strongest argument in favor of conceptual primitivism about truth. This argument, the *argument from omnipresence*, reveals truth to reside among our conceptual primitives.

¹ See Frege 1956, Sosa 1993, Davidson 1996, McGinn 2000, and Patterson 2010 for various defenses of primitivism.

2. Primitive TRUTH

Primitivism about truth is defined in terms of two preliminary distinctions. First, we need to distinguish between the *property* of truth and our *concept* TRUTH. The primitivism I am defending involves only the concept of truth. I am neutral on exactly how we should draw the property/concept distinction, but that there is such a distinction should be familiar. Consider the case of water. On the one hand we have the property of being water, that property of fluids that are necessarily composed of H₂O molecules. On the other hand we have our concept WATER; those who are competent with the concept need not judge that it's necessary that water is H₂O.

The second crucial distinction is that between *substantive* and *deflationary* theories of truth. Substantive theories take truth to be a rich, explanatory notion² useful in philosophical analysis; deflationary theories (e.g., Horwich 1990) typically hold that there is little else to giving a theory of truth beyond pointing out its expressive utility (in allowing us to form generalizations, express infinite conjunctions and disjunctions, etc.). With both distinctions in hand, we can appreciate how one might be a deflationist along one but not both dimensions of truth. I ultimately advocate a deflationary position with respect to the property of truth: I do not believe that the property of truth is “metaphysically robust”, which on my view is to say that truth is among the *abundant* but not the *sparse* properties, however one might draw that distinction.³ But I advocate primitivism with respect to the concept TRUTH. Conceptual primitivism is a substantive account because it takes TRUTH to be a philosophically important and explanatorily potent concept. Because truth is primitive, it can be used to account for other concepts of philosophical interest (like knowledge, assertion, belief, meaning, etc.).

Primitivism about TRUTH is the view that the concept is fundamental, and not derivative. Hence, TRUTH cannot be analyzed, defined, or explained in terms of other concepts that are themselves more fundamental. Moreover, the primitivist view holds that truth is among our most valuable concepts; it takes center stage in our conceptual scheme. Primitivism acknowledges that truth is an explanatorily potent concept, which is exactly what we should expect from all of our most fundamental concepts, whatever others there may be.⁴ Because TRUTH is fundamental, we may use it to offer accounts of other concepts; unlike deflationists,

² I sometimes use ‘notion’ where the concept/property distinction is not particularly relevant, my remarks apply to both, or when discussing other views that elide the distinction.

³ I defend this view in my forthcoming. For the distinction between sparse and abundant properties, see Lewis 1983.

⁴ Other primitivists include Moore on goodness (1903), Williamson on knowledge (2000), and Maudlin on laws of nature (2007).

primitivists can rely on truth in ways other than as just a device for disquotation, forming generalizations, and the like. Primitivists can accept that truth bears all the logical and linguistic features that deflationists attribute to it. What they deny is that these features exhaust everything interesting there is to say about truth. In fact, primitivism can be seen as the *most* anti-deflationary view. For deflationists, truth is a fairly boring, thin, logical concept. For traditional substantivists, truth is an important, thick concept, but one that can be explained in more fundamental terms. Primitivists go further still, and say that truth is even more important than traditional substantivists acknowledge: TRUTH is in the class of the most important and central concepts.

3. The Argument from Omnipresence

3.1. Overview of the argument

The most famous argument for primitivism is Frege's "treadmill" that attempts to show that any attempt at defining truth is doomed to launch an epistemic regress or circularity (1956: 291 and 1979: 128-129, 134). I believe that this argument fails for familiar reasons (see, e.g., Soames 1999: 21-29). But a different, non-epistemic circularity argument can be given, one which also relies on Fregean grounds: the doctrine of the omnipresence of truth.

The goal of the omnipresence argument is to show that any definition of truth ultimately relies on a conceptual circularity: any notion used to define truth itself presupposes truth. One way to accomplish that task is to show that truth is somehow antecedently implicated by all of our judgments, including any judgment that truth is defined by thus-and-so. In "The Thought" Frege writes: "It may nevertheless be thought that we cannot recognize a property of a thing without at the same time realizing the thought that this thing has this property to be true. So with every property of a thing is joined a property of a thought, namely, that of truth" (1956: 293). In the unpublished "Logic", Frege similarly claims that what "distinguishes [truth] from all other predicates is that predicating it is always included in predicating anything whatever" (1979: 129). If truth is omnipresent, then it is found, explicitly or not, within all of our judgments.

Suppose Frege's doctrine of omnipresence is true, and so truth is already a part of every judgment that we make. Truth is thereby to be found inside any purported *definiens* of truth. For whatever claim is used to reveal the nature of truth, *that very claim* already employs truth, and so the purported definition is circular. In effect, omnipresence is the doctrine that truth is already inside all of our judgments, and so no judgment could reveal truth's nature without at the same

time employing it. With omnipresence in hand, we have an argument to the effect that truth cannot be defined without circularity, which is to say that truth cannot be defined in terms of concepts that are more fundamental. Obviously, all of the weight in this argument is borne by the omnipresence thesis. Hence, I turn now to an articulation and defense of the doctrine.

3.2. Omnipresence defined

The omnipresence of truth is a vital part of Frege's ideography that he presents in his *Begriffsschrift* (1879), which develops the formal language that Frege uses in formulating his logical system.⁵ As Künne sums it up: "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" (2008: 35). In the ideography signs like ' $2 + 2 = 4$ ' are prefixed with various kinds of strokes. In particular, the two part '⊢' symbol marks that an assertion of what follows has been made. The horizontal part of the symbol, in effect, is the predicate 'is identical with the True',⁶ whereas the vertical part (the "judgment-stroke") represents the assertion. The striking feature of Frege's ideography is that every sentence includes the horizontal (though non-asserted sentences will not include the judgment-stroke). For Frege, the truth predicate is a part of every judgment, a fact that gets built explicitly into his formal system.⁷

Setting aside Frege's formal system, there are a variety of theses that one might associate with the idea that truth is omnipresent. Künne defines omnipresence as the view that, necessarily, if someone V s that/whether p , then that person V s that/whether it is true that p (2003: 35). ' V ' stands for any of the variety of propositional attitudes we can take toward thoughts (such as believing, doubting, wondering, and knowing), or propositional speech acts that make use of them (such as asserting or questioning). For example, if one believes that snow is white, then one also believes that it is true that snow is white. If one asserts that grass is green, then one also asserts that it is true that grass is green.

⁵ See Künne 2003: 34-37 and 50-52 and 2008: 34-35, Stepanians 2003, and Taschek 2008. The system is developed further in Frege 1964.

⁶ For Frege, 'the True' is the name for the referent (*Bedeutung*) of every true sentence. See his 1952.

⁷ A medieval precedent for omnipresence might be found in the doctrine, often associated with John Buridan, that "every proposition, because of its form, signifies or asserts itself to be true" (Buridan 1966: 194). See also Read 2002.

Let me make three comments on Künne's definition, after which I shall offer my own. First, a biconditional is called for, not a conditional. *V*ing that *p* accompanies *V*ing that it is true that *p* and *vice versa*. Secondly, Künne's definition leaves it open whether, in any particular case, we are dealing with one or two distinct cognitive states or speech acts. When I believe that *p*, I believe that it is true that *p*. Is omnipresence the view that one belief state requires a new one, or that we are dealing with just one belief state under two different descriptions? The first reading is unacceptable, for it generates a vicious regress. If to believe that *p* one must have the distinct belief that it is true that *p*, then by the same reasoning to believe that it is true that *p* one must also have a still further belief that it is true that it is true that *p*, and so on. To engage in one cognitive act, one would have to engage in infinitely many cognitive acts, which is impossible for finite minds like our own. Similarly, asserting that *p* cannot require one to make a separate assertion that it is true that *p*; since assertions are distinct speech acts, the existence of one act of assertion cannot necessitate the existence of a second, distinct act of assertion. So according to omnipresence, believing, judging, or asserting that *p* is *exactly the same thing as* believing, judging, or asserting that it is true that *p*. All we have here are two ways of describing one single thing. Similarly, believing or asserting that snow is white is identical to believing or asserting that *Schnee ist weiss* or that *la nieve es blanca*.

The third crucial observation concerning Künne's definition involves his appropriately drawing the equivalence between the thought that *p* and the thought that it is true that *p*. Consider the following contents:

- (i) Snow is white.
- (ii) It is true that snow is white.
- (iii) The thought/proposition/fact/belief that snow is white is true.
- (iv) 'Snow is white' is true.

Omnipresence holds that (i) and (ii) are identical, but that the others are distinct. On the face of it, (iii) involves predications of truth to truth bearers, whereas (i) and (ii) are more directly just about snow and its color. Furthermore, (iii) appears to involve an ontological commitment to various kinds of truth bearers, and so one might reject the truth of (iii) while admitting (i) and (ii). Unlike (iii), (ii) is not obviously committed to the existence of entities like thoughts or propositions, and it would require some argument to show that it is. Hence, those who reject the existence of such things can happily use expressions like 'it is true that'. The function of '*p*' in 'It is true that *p*' is to serve as a variable ranging over *sentential* expressions, not propositions. Finally,

(iv) concerns a particular sentence of English whose meaning is contingent, and so it could differ in truth value from the others, had it meant something different.

It's important to note that saying that the sentences 'Snow is white' and 'It is true that snow is white' have identical contents is not tantamount to saying that they serve all the same conversational roles. They are distinct English sentences, and as such can serve different conversational purposes in different contexts. Using the latter may, for example, serve as a way of emphasizing one's point after having previously used the former.⁸ Omnipresence makes no claims about the intersubstitutability of distinct *sentences* for various conversational purposes. The thesis claims that '*p*' and 'It is true that *p*' *say* the same thing, though they may *do* different things, depending on the contextual and pragmatic features operant in the conversational settings in which they appear.

The doctrine of omnipresence, as I shall understand it, is a conjunction of two claims. First is what we have seen already, that for any sentential expression *p*, the thought that *p* is identical to the thought that it is true that *p*.⁹ But this first thesis alone does not capture the main idea behind omnipresence, which is that truth is somehow contained in every judgment, that it is *present* everywhere. So the second claim behind omnipresence is that the concept TRUTH in some sense forms part of the conceptual content of any thought whatsoever. It's this presence of truth that accounts for what makes the thought a *thought*, that is, a truth-apt content suitable for judgment, belief, assertion, and the like. Omnipresence thereby explains the difference between *thoughts* (e.g., that kangaroos hop) and non-truth-apt contents like *ideas* (e.g., kangaroos, hopping).

The second claim of omnipresence might be thought to explain the first. Borrowing some terminology from Brandom (1994), we might say that the expression 'It is true that *p*' *makes explicit* what is otherwise left implicit by '*p*'. The reason that the two thoughts are identical is that adding the operator 'it is true that' ends up adding nothing that isn't already present. As a result, in the very act of tokening a thought—regardless of whether we go on to believe it, doubt it, or assert it—we have already deployed our concept of truth. This is not to say that we take

⁸ My thanks go to a referee here for the example, and for pushing me to be clear on this point.

⁹ And, of course, the thought that it is true that *p* is in turn identical to the thought that it is true that it is true that *p*, and so on. There's no regress of *thoughts* or *truths* here (these are identity claims), just of *names*. Furthermore, it would be incorrect to conclude from this indefinitely long list of names for the thought that *p* that the thought somehow contains indefinitely many predications of truth. To judge that it's true that *p* isn't to predicate truth of anything. (Not so for judging that the thought that *p* is true.) The idea behind Fregean omnipresence is that the sense in which truth belongs to every thought is not predicative (cf. Frege 1979: 194). It would be more accurate to say that truth is a "logical" part (as is reflected in Frege's own symbolism); it is that which accounts not for the thought's particular predicative content, but for why the thought is a *thought* and not some other mental state.

everything we ever contemplate to be true. For to *assent* to the truth of the thought that p is not simply to contemplate the thought that it is true that p , as Frege keenly observed (1979: 129, 233). Piling on sentential operators cannot turn a thought into an assertion.¹⁰ What omnipresence reveals is that we cannot believe, assert, or even understand the thought that p without possessing and employing our concept of truth.

3.3. Omnipresence defended

Let's turn now to the defense of omnipresence, which I begin with an analogy. Omnipresence about truth has a much better known cousin: the omnipresence of existence. Famously, Kant rejected the ontological argument for the existence of God by arguing that "Being is obviously not a real predicate, i.e., a concept of something that could add to the concept of a thing" (1998: 567; A596/B624). According to Kant, there is no difference between (a) a concept of God as being omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent, and (b) a concept of God as being omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent, and existing. As a result, there is no pressure to take things that satisfy the concept (b) as being more perfect than things that satisfy the concept (a), and then infer that the most perfect thing imaginable has to exist.

The doctrine is already present in Hume as well:

The idea of existence, then, is the very same with the idea of what we conceive to be existent. To reflect on any thing simply, and to reflect on it as existent, are nothing different from each other. That idea, when conjoin'd with the idea of any object, makes no addition to it. Whatever we conceive, we conceive to be existent. Any idea we please to form is the idea of a being; and the idea of a being is any idea we please to form. (2000: 48; 1.2.6.4)

Here we have a clear statement of the omnipresence of existence. As do Kant and Frege after him, Hume employs the language of "addition". Nothing is added to a conception of something by conceiving it as existing. If I ask you to imagine a kangaroo, and then to imagine an *existing* kangaroo, I have not asked you to do two separate things. Similarly, if I ask you to consider whether kangaroos live in Australia, and then to consider whether it's true that kangaroos live in Australia, I have not asked you to do two separate things. Hence, just as adding existence to an

¹⁰ As Frege writes: "it is really by using the form of an assertoric sentence that we assert truth, and to do this we do not need the word 'true'" (1979: 129).

idea adds nothing, so too does adding truth to a thought add nothing. When we're contemplating a thought, we're already contemplating its truth, and so there's nothing left to add that isn't already present.

A second source of support for omnipresence comes from trying to separate out in one's mind thoughts that p from thoughts that it is true that p . Try to place yourself in a state of mind where you are considering the thought that p but *not* the thought that it is true that p . Think to yourself, "I wonder whether there are any kangaroos in Africa, though I don't wonder whether it's true that there are any kangaroos in Africa". I for one cannot do it. But if these two thoughts are not identical, then it should be possible to think one of them without thinking the other. In fact, it should be possible to accept one and reject the other. Granted, since the two necessarily share the same truth value, such a state of mind would be inconsistent. But it's perfectly possible to have an inconsistent state of mind. Still, it does not seem possible to accept that p while rejecting that it is true that p . I can imagine no state of mind for which such a description would be apt.

A third source of support involves the empirical indistinguishability between thoughts that p and thoughts that it is true that p . If the two thoughts are distinct, then believing one is a different mental state from believing the other; there must be an empirical difference between the two belief states. Suppose I see Sophia smiling as she walks out of a classroom where she has just taken an exam. To explain her smile, I hypothesize that Sophia believes that she did well on the test. My partner hypothesizes instead that Sophia believes that it's true that she did well on the test. The opponent of omnipresence holds that because my partner and I are attributing different beliefs to Sophia, we are offering competing empirical claims about Sophia. Such a difference should therefore be empirically detectable, but that is highly implausible. There is no empirical test to discriminate between a belief that p and a belief that it is true that p .

A final and related point applies to the same kind of example. If beliefs that p are distinct from beliefs that it is true that p , then there ought to be cases where attributing one belief rather than the other results in greater explanatory or predictive power. If there is any genuine difference between my and my partner's hypotheses, one would expect there to be some explanatory or predictive difference between them. But I fail to see any such difference. My partner and I have given equally good diagnoses of Sophia's belief state. Nothing of value is gained or lost by describing things in terms of ' p ' rather than 'It is true that p '. In essence, the

opponent of omnipresence is committed to there being some empirical contrast between beliefs that p and beliefs that it is true that p , but no such contrast appears to exist.¹¹

To deny omnipresence, one must articulate some possible phenomenon that could only be accounted for by appeal to the thought that p , but not the thought that it is true that p (or vice versa). There could never *be* any situation where only one of those was true, so the phenomenon would have to involve someone's taking a cognitive attitude toward one of them but not the other. The case would have to be something like: Phil believes that p , but does not believe that it is true that p . In such a case, Phil's *worldview* is contradictory. But is the description of *Phil* even coherent? Could there be someone who believes that p but not that it's true that p ? I do not see how. Sure, someone might be willing to say the *words* ' p ' but not 'It is true that p '. But so long as I am inclined to describe a person as believing that p , I am equally inclined to describe that person as believing that it's true that p . (Likewise, I am willing to attribute to Sophia the belief that snow is white, even if I know that she doesn't speak English and would herself refer to her belief with '*Schnee ist weiss*'.) The opponent of omnipresence must find some way of pulling the two apart, of finding some explanatory or predictive value in employing one but not the other. Again, the needed difference must involve a demand for positing distinct *contents*; the objection cannot be that the *sentences* ' p ' and 'It is true that p ' can be used for different functions or purposes (which is surely true). In cases where ' p ' and 'It is true that p ' can play distinct conversational roles, this is best explained not by claiming that they express different propositions, but by turning to the various contextual and pragmatic forces that are operant in the conversation.

My defense of omnipresence has so far focused on the claim that thoughts that p are identical to thoughts that it is true that p . But just as crucial to omnipresence is the idea that truth already forms part of the content of any thought. Above, I suggested that this second thesis can help explain the first. If TRUTH belongs already to the thought that p , then there is nothing to distinguish it from the thought that it is true that p , and so it is no surprise that the two are inseparable. Furthermore, if one is willing to grant that TRUTH is part of the content of the

¹¹ A referee has suggested the following sort of empirical test for omnipresence. Scan the brains of subjects and search for any differences between when they are prompted with 'Contemplate the thought that p ' and 'Contemplate the thought that it is true that p '. I doubt that such differences, if indeed detected, would go very far in undermining omnipresence. What such an experiment would most directly test is the difference in how the brain is reacting to two distinct verbal prompts. There is a very real difference between the *sentences* ' p ' and 'It is true that p '. Nevertheless, I grant that detecting some difference in such an experiment would be *some* evidence against omnipresence, but quite unconvincing evidence. After all, I would predict that there would be differences in brain scans between prompts of 'Snow is white' and '*Schnee ist weiss*', but that would do little to suggest that these sentences aren't synonymous.

thought that it is true that p , then by the identity TRUTH also belongs to the content of the thought that p . Even opponents of omnipresence should find it plausible that TRUTH forms part of the content of the thought that it is true that p ; otherwise, they would have no basis for thinking that the thought that it is true that p is somehow conceptually richer than the thought that p .

3.4. Omnipresence under attack

We can bolster the defense of omnipresence by next turning to its detractors. The most important objection is due to Künne, who explains his opposition as follows:

I find this doctrine hard to swallow. Isn't it possible to entertain the thought that *it is raining* without exercising one's mastery of the concept of truth? (When we say that the cat, or the baby, has noticed that it is raining, do we presuppose that the cat, or the baby, has mastered the concept of truth?) Young children can certainly understand lots of sentences without understanding the word 'true' or any synonym thereof. We can, and we often do, I think, explain to children what 'true' means by giving them instructions such as: 'If you say, "It is raining", and it is raining, then what you say is true. But if you say, "It is raining", and it isn't raining, then what you say is not true. Or if you say, "It is snowing", and it is snowing, then what you say is true. But if you say, "It is snowing", and it isn't snowing, then what you say is not true. Got it?' To understand such an explanation, the child must of course already understand sentences such as 'It is raining' and 'It is snowing'. Whether the child has 'got it' will become manifest in her or his future use of 'true'. (2003: 51)

Künne's charge is that the omnipresence thesis is too demanding. To judge that snow is white one need not deploy one's concept of truth. Sure, snow is white just in case it's true that snow is white. But, Künne asks, can we not judge that snow is white without thereby judging *in addition* (or, better, *at the same time*) that it's true that snow is white? Doesn't the latter involve heavier conceptual machinery that children or animals, for example, might lack?

Künne's response reveals his view as to what it is that indicates that someone possesses a concept of truth. His focus concerns whether or not someone is competent with the word 'true'; because children can understand sentences like 'It's snowing' before they can understand

sentences like ‘It’s true that it’s snowing’, Künne infers that possessing a concept of truth is not necessary for judging that it’s snowing. What Künne is presupposing is that one’s possession of a concept of truth is indicated (if not also constituted) by one’s competence with *words* like ‘true’ and ‘truth’. This view, however, is untenable, and the best response to Künne’s worries about omnipresence is to defend an alternative conception of what it is to possess a concept of truth. Hence, we can grant that Künne is correct when it comes to developing a mastery of sentences involving ‘true’ and ‘truth’. Perhaps we need to understand ‘It is snowing’ before we can understand ‘It’s true that it is snowing’. But this admission leaves untouched the issue of whether a *concept* of truth lies behind our ability to form judgments.

In general, I see little reason to believe that conceptual competence is constituted or even indicated by linguistic competence. Anyone willing to attribute concepts to non-linguistic animals (or pre-linguistic humans) must reject the view that concepts require language. With respect to TRUTH in particular, there is great reason to attribute it to speakers who nevertheless lack a truth predicate in their language. To illustrate, consider a community of speakers who speak a “Tarski approved” language, i.e., a language that does not include its own semantic machinery (thereby avoiding liar-related paradox), and so includes no truth predicate. The speakers of our language are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who are stuck on a desert island with only a coin to toss. Their language is a semantics-free fragment of English, and includes (or is even limited to) these two sentences:

- (H) The coin landed heads.
- (T) The coin landed tails.

Suppose we are anthropologists studying their behavior. Rosencrantz flips the coin, but Guildenstern can’t see the result. Rosencrantz typically utters (H) when the coin lands heads, and (T) when it lands tails, and always shows the result to Guildenstern afterwards. But sometimes they act differently, as when Rosencrantz utters (H) when the coin lands tails, and (T) when it lands heads. He always smiles when he does this, though, and they have a good laugh afterwards. It wouldn’t take us long to understand what these two are up to. They think it’s funny when Rosencrantz doesn’t tell the truth. Guildenstern understands what it is for Rosencrantz to tell to truth, and Rosencrantz fully understands the distinction between truth and falsity as well—he exploits it in order to have some fun on the island. They have this understanding in spite of not having specialized semantic vocabulary to articulate it. The moral of this story is that the concept of truth is a part of Rosencrantz’s and Guildenstern’s cognitive lives, in spite of ‘true’ not being a

part of their linguistic lives. The concept of truth enters their mind not when ‘true’ does, but when they form any thought at all. It would be incorrect to say of a case where Rosencrantz witnesses a heads toss that he believes that the coin landed heads but not that he believes that it’s true that the coin landed heads. Both expressions provide a perfectly apt description of the phenomenon. *Rosencrantz* wouldn’t use the latter description (he doesn’t have the words), but it is no less true of him for that.¹²

The case of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern shows that it is appropriate to attribute to them a concept of truth (as revealed by their ability to engage in belief, assertion, deception, etc.) in spite of having no truth predicate in their language. In a slogan, TRUTH is prior to ‘truth’. My claim isn’t simply that because *we* (who clearly possess TRUTH) describe Rosencrantz and Guildenstern using truth, that they therefore have a concept of truth. That inference is obviously fallacious. Rather, it’s that their behavior involves the kinds of activities that are constitutive of possessing TRUTH, activities that they couldn’t perform without having the concept. Hence, the evidence that someone has a concept of truth is not revealed by an ability to wield ‘true’, but by an ability to believe, judge, assert, deceive, deny, etc. A basic fact about concepts is that they allow us to sort and categorize the world that we experience. What is constitutive of possessing the concept TRUTH is, in part, an understanding of the difference between something’s being true and not being true, and we don’t need ‘true’ to do that. That understanding is precisely what Rosencrantz employs as he engages with Guildenstern. He understands what it is for his utterances to be or not to be true, and this competence is what accounts for his possession of a truth concept.

To understand the thought that *p*, then, one must understand the distinction between it being true that *p* and it being false that *p*. It follows that a concept of truth is also necessary for forming beliefs, making assertions, and the like. To believe that *p*, you first have to understand that *p*, and judge it to be true that *p*. Belief in something just is belief in its truth. There is no believing without an implicit understanding of the distinction between truth and falsity. Similarly, to assert that *p* is to put forward it’s being true that *p*. One cannot make an assertion if one doesn’t understand what it is to put something forward as being true. What makes someone’s assertion an *assertion* (and not, say, a hypothesizing) is that person’s attitude with respect to the truth of the remark, and how others should regard the truth of the remark.

¹² A referee has pointed out that we can also describe their behavior not by using truth, but some other factive notion (such as *describing what is the case*) instead. This signals to me that these explanations work precisely because factive notions, being factive, already presuppose the notion of truth.

Simply put, the concept of truth is implicated in all sorts of cognitive states and speech acts. Without a concept of truth, one cannot understand the distinction between truth and falsity, form beliefs, or make and recognize assertions. Omnipresence explains this phenomenon, as it claims that the concept of truth is built in to our judgments from the beginning, such that one cannot entertain the thought that p without already grasping the concept of truth. Künne's concern was that mastery of the concept of truth is revealed by mastery of the word 'true'. I have offered an alternative and independently plausible account that locates our conceptual competence with truth in our ability to engage in certain sorts of cognitive and speech acts. Once we see that such conceptual competence need not accompany linguistic competence—that TRUTH is prior to 'truth'—we no longer need to suspect that the thought that it's true that p is somehow conceptually richer than the thought that p .

I have now concluded my defense of omnipresence. Equipped with the doctrine, we can explain the *a priori* inference between that p and that it is true that p , as it's an inference between identical contents. We can explain the empirical indiscernibility between Phil who believes that p and Sophia who believes that it is true that p . We can explain the impossibility of imagining a person who believes that p but not that it is true that p . We can explain why it is that when we understand a claim, we understand what it is for that claim to be true. And we can explain how even those without semantic vocabulary can engage in cognitive and speech acts that presuppose an understanding of truth. Opponents of omnipresence think that the thought that p and the thought that it is true that p are not identical, presumably because the latter is conceptually richer. But where is this extra substance coming from? We can't simply say that the latter, but not the former, involves TRUTH, for that is simply begging the question against omnipresence; moreover, it seems to presuppose an untenable view regarding the relationship between TRUTH and 'truth'. TRUTH is prior, not 'truth'.

3.5. The argument again

With omnipresence now defended, let us return briefly to the main argument for TRUTH's being indefinable and therefore primitive. If omnipresence is true, then the thought that p is the same thing as the thought that it is true that p . As a result, whatever conceptual resources are needed for thinking that p are exactly the same as the conceptual resources that are needed for thinking that it is true that p . Furthermore, if omnipresence is true, then any thought has TRUTH already as part of its content. Even if one balks at this very general claim, we can at least recognize that TRUTH is part of the content of the thought that it is true that p . (This idea, recall,

seems to be the driving force behind the resistance to omnipresence.) And here we can infer from the initial identity that the plain old thought that p also includes TRUTH. The activity of defining or analyzing a concept into more fundamental terms requires that the thoughts doing the analyzing not presuppose the concepts being analyzed, on pain of circularity (and incoherent relations of priority). Any purported analysis of TRUTH must offer up thoughts composed of concepts that are all prior to the concept of truth. But because of omnipresence, those thoughts will themselves contain TRUTH, and so cannot be more fundamental. Consequently, any purported analysis of TRUTH will fall victim to circularity, for that analysis will already contain TRUTH.

4. Some Deflationary Responses

One way to resist the argument is to argue that the concept TRUTH doesn't figure into the content of any thought whatsoever, even the thought that it is true that p . What explains the identity between the thought that p and the thought that it is true that p is not that the former already contains TRUTH, but instead that the latter, despite appearances, does not. Some deflationists might take up this response, arguing that truth is too thin a concept to add any genuine substance to a claim. There's a sense in which I agree that truth doesn't add anything to a thought: appending a sentence with 'it is true that' doesn't change what the sentence expresses. But all that shows is that TRUTH doesn't get into thoughts by way of truth predicates or truth operators; it's there already. Similar remarks apply to existence: an idea of a lion just is an idea of an existing lion, but it doesn't follow that the concept of existence has no conceptual content to contribute to thoughts involving it. Furthermore, if deflationists resist the argument for the reason I've suggested, they must hold that no thought whatsoever involves truth as part of its content. If so, deflationists face an independent problem, for they are at pains to explain what claims like 'To assert is to present as true' mean. In such cases, 'true' can't be disquoted away: to assert that snow is white is not simply to present that snow is white, for there are many non-assertoric ways of presenting the thought that snow is white.¹³ On my view, this sentence expresses a conceptual connection between our concept of assertion and our primitive concept of truth. Deflationists must hold that even sentences with non-disquotable uses of 'true' are given their content completely independently of TRUTH, which is not very plausible.¹⁴

¹³ See Bar-On and Simmons 2007 for a development of this argument.

¹⁴ Note that one might alternatively resist the argument by claiming that while TRUTH contributes nothing to the content of thoughts like the thought that it is true that p , it might still contribute something to other thoughts, like

It is paramount to recognize that the omnipresence argument sets both traditional substantive views and deflationary views in its sights. If the truth of something is to be defined in terms of its corresponding with the facts or cohering in an ideal system, then the omnipresence argument shows that the purportedly defining thoughts already presuppose the concept of truth, and so their constitutive concepts cannot be more fundamental than TRUTH itself. The argument holds equally well against “deflationary definitions” of truth, as in the following: For all p , p is true if and only if p is ‘Snow is white’ and snow is white, or p is ‘Grass is green’ and grass is green, and so on.¹⁵ Here the *definiens* takes the form of an infinitely long disjunction of conjunctions, but this in no way inoculates it from omnipresence. The infinite disjunction presupposes TRUTH just as much as any finite disjunction.

Next consider the deflationary account favored by Horwich, who argues that truth can be “implicitly defined” by means of a set of principles that fix the meaning of ‘true’. Such principles are the most “fundamental principles” of truth (1990: 18). In Horwich’s case, these principles are the propositional T-sentences, such as ‘The proposition that snow is white is true if and only if snow is white’. But if truth is defined, albeit implicitly, by the T-sentences, then it does not avoid the threat of omnipresence. For the T-sentences themselves (as well as their two constituents) express thoughts, and so to entertain what they say one already has to deploy the concept TRUTH. Hence, primitivists reject the deflationists’ claim that the T-sentences are the most basic facts about truth, in virtue of which we understand the concept. To understand T-sentences we must already possess the concept of truth. As a result, any deflationist theory that rests our understanding of truth on the truth of the T-sentences falls prey to the omnipresence argument. No thought can be given to explain the concept of truth in more fundamental terms, for any thought whatsoever already presupposes the concept of truth.

What of deflationists who get out of the business of defining truth altogether? Might such views be able to accept the omnipresence argument, but nevertheless resist primitivism? On this approach to deflationism, we get at the concept of truth not by defining it, but by showing what it *does*. What is truth? A device for disquotation, forming generalizations, constructing anaphora, etc. This species of deflationism is centered around the linguistic functions of ‘true’ and its cognates. For example, Jc Beall writes that the “sole role of [truth]—the reason behind its

the thought that to assert is to present as true. This bifurcating maneuver is not available to deflationists, however, for it requires truth to have a non-deflationary contribution to make to some thoughts. The maneuver is consistent with primitivism and other substantive theories of truth. Still, a uniform treatment of the contribution of TRUTH to thoughts expressed by way of ‘true’ and ‘truth’, which is precisely what omnipresence offers, is more desirable than a disjunctive one.

¹⁵ See, e.g., Leeds 1978: 121 and Field 1986: 58.

introduction into the language—is to enable generalizations that, given our finite constraints, we couldn't otherwise express" (2005: 7).

The problem with this species of deflationism is its exclusive focus on 'true' and its cognates. There is something to the thought that 'true' is merely of expressive use, that its reason for being is to allow us to express things that our finite limitations would otherwise prevent us from expressing. Advocates of omnipresence, Frege included, can agree, to a degree. The thought that snow is white already contains within itself the concept of truth, and so saying 'It's true that snow is white' doesn't express a different thought than saying 'Snow is white' does. As a linguistic device, 'true' is often redundant. But redundancy has its limits. The sentence 'To assert is to present as true' does not employ 'true' as a device for disquotation or forming generalizations. So here we have a counterexample to Beall's claim: without 'true', we would have no way of expressing the thought behind 'To assert is to present as true'. What the sentence actually does is express a conceptual relationship between our concepts of truth and assertion. These connections would still exist even if 'true' and 'assert' did not. A key lesson that we drew from the discussion of omnipresence is that TRUTH is prior to 'truth' and 'true'. Rational beings can possess a concept of truth even in the absence of possessing any semantic vocabulary. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, for example, have a concept of truth, one that provides them their sole source of entertainment, in spite of having no device for forming infinite conjunctions (or any need for it, for that matter).

Even if Beall and his fellow deflationists were correct that the introduction of the words 'true' and 'truth' were of mere expressive convenience, we could draw no conclusion about the importance of the introduction of TRUTH into our thought. We might say that, similar to how 'true' is a device for disquotation and the like, TRUTH is a device for *forming thoughts*. We deploy our concept of truth every time we make a judgment, form a hypothesis, or question a belief. Rather than being an innocuous, "merely logical" concept, truth is at the very center of our cognitive lives. Omnipresence is thus starkly at odds with conceptual deflationism, understood as the thesis that the concept of truth is exhausted by the mere expressive use of 'true', and not explanatorily connected to other concepts like belief, assertion, and justification. Primitivists, by contrast, argue that truth is actually one of the most central of our concepts, a concept, as Davidson puts it, without which we would not have any other concepts (1996: 264). Instead of being exhausted by an account of 'true', our concept of truth exists completely independently of 'true'.

5. Conclusion

Conceptual primitivism is a highly attractive theory of truth. If we are happy to grant that not all of our concepts are equally fundamental, that some concepts are prior to others, then truth emerges as a perfect candidate for being among our conceptual foundations. Sometimes, in the business of analysis, we forget that analyses have to stop somewhere: they cannot continue on *ad infinitum*. The most plausible stopping points for analyses are concepts that are so fundamental and so general that they crop up all across our thinking. Truth is one such notion, and so conceptual primitivism is a quite natural view, not some theory of last resort. Furthermore, we can harness arguments like the omnipresence argument in its defense.

Despite these attractions, primitivism about truth has received little philosophical attention. This state of affairs is somewhat surprising, given primitivism's starring role in the origins of analytic philosophy. Frege defended primitivism, and primitivism is the view that Moore and Russell landed on (albeit only temporarily) upon rejecting British idealism.¹⁶ I suggest that we borrow a page from history, and recognize primitivism as a defensible and plausible theory of truth. It avoids the pitfalls of both traditional substantive theories of truth and deflationary theories. Primitivism rejects the traditional analyses of truth in terms of correspondence, coherence, and utility, but does so without compromising the paramount importance that the concept plays in our cognitive lives.*

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¹⁶ See Moore 1899 for his defense of primitivism, and his 1953 for his rejection. Russell advocates the view in his 1904, and rejects it in his 1966.

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