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## Review of "Truth"

## Book Review | *Truth*

### Benjamin W. Jarvis

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***Truth*; Alexis G. Burgess and John P. Burgess, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011. 158pp., \$25.95 pbk., ISBN 978-0-691-14401-6**

### 1. Introduction

*Truth* does not purport to solve all or even any of the philosophical problems that revolve around the nature of truth. According to the authors, Alexis Burgess and John Burgess, the aim of the book is only to survey contemporary work on these problems rather than give a systematic defense of some alleged solutions to them. That, one might think, is a modest task. However, upon reading this book, one realizes it is not, in fact, a modest task—particularly if the survey is to be comprehensible to those who are not especially familiar with recent work on truth.

To begin with, one has to find a way to balance the *formal* aspects of the theory of truth—e.g. formal solutions to the liar paradox found in the work of Tarski and Kripke—with *less formal* aspects—e.g. whether truth could be understood as a kind of correspondence with the world. What's more, one has to do justice to any number of philosophers who have wanted to take truth captive to serve their own philosophical purposes—whether in metaphysics, epistemology, logic, or the philosophy of language. Burgess and Burgess handle these and other obstacles elegantly. They show excellent judgment in carefully selecting what positions to discuss. When they raise some claim for consideration, they pursue it just long enough for the reader to appreciate what's at issue and just briefly enough so that reader isn't ensnared by thorny details. Their explanations of formal material are accurate and pleasant to read. Their presentation of less formal material is crisp, precise, and charming.

The preface of the books indicates that the book is an introduction intended for “advanced undergraduate or beginning graduate students of philosophy, or the general reader with some philosophical background.” The book is well suited for this purpose. I wish that I had had this book when I began thinking about truth as a graduate student. I might have made considerable more progress in my thinking.

While a number of topics appear in the book, there are two principal themes. One theme is that the equivalence principle—“Saying something is true is equivalent to just saying it” (p. 8)—faces a number of technical problems. The most salient of these problems is perhaps the liar paradox. The liar paradox comes up in the treatment of Tarski (Chapter Three) and Kripke (Chapter Seven), but also receives more thorough and direct discussion in Chapter Eight. In addition to the liar paradox, the authors also reckon with the problems created by presupposition and vagueness in Chapter Four.

For this review, I will focus on a second theme: the debate between deflationism and (varieties of) non-deflationism. This debate is the focus of Chapters One, Three, Five, and Six.

## 2. In Defense of a Deflationary Perspective

Although the book is written as an introduction of sorts, the authors do not pretend to be writing from a neutral standpoint. Burgess and Burgess express sympathy for a deflationary theory of truth. Deflationary theories of truth are closely associated with the equivalence principle given above. But, to some extent, this association is misleading since all theorists should aspire to embrace the equivalence principle (at least insofar as the liar paradox allows). Everybody should admit that one can recover the truth conditions for a truth bearer by using the truth bearer itself. What distinguishes deflationary theories is their austerity: there’s not much else to say about the nature of the concept of truth or truth itself that isn’t captured by this recipe for recovering truth conditions.

The opponent of deflationary theories of truth thus faces the challenge of explaining what a deflationary theory of truth has left out. In fact, this is not simply a challenge that must be confronted in the pursuit of defeating deflationism. It is a challenge that must be confronted merely in order to clearly delineate an alternative. Burgess and Burgess consider a number of possible ways of confronting this challenge. I will mention three:

- (1) In Chapter Three (p. 47), Burgess and Burgess consider the possibility that deflationism has left out that truth is a property. However, as they adeptly point out, whether we should say that truth is a property depends perhaps more on what being

a property turns out to be than what truth does. (Indeed, the nature of properties is, arguably, murkier than the nature of truth, making it difficult for the former to shed much light on the latter.)

- (2) In the middle of Chapter Five (pp. 72–3), Burgess and Burgess consider the possibility that what has been left out is the truthmaking relation that holds between a true truth bearer and some (existing) aspect of reality. In response, they note David Lewis’s observation: ‘truthmaking’ may be something of a misnomer as it does not seem to have much to do with truth at all. Those preoccupied by truthmaking seem attracted to the thought that how things are is entirely due to what there is, or in other words, that any kind of theoretical commitment—even to a simple claim to the effect that snow is white—must ultimately be, come with, or stem from an ontological commitment. Interesting as this thought might be, it doesn’t really seem to be a thought about truth *per se*. The thought seems to be that, for instance, snow’s being white has an ontological basis or at least ontological implications. Of course, if this is so for snow’s being white, then it is also so for <Snow is white>’s—that is to say the proposition’s—truth. But, the latter seems to be entirely a consequence of the equivalence principle and the fact that snow’s being white is explanatorily prior to <Snow is white>’s being true. Yet, the equivalence principle and this explanatory asymmetry appear to be wholly consonant with deflationism.
- (3) Finally, at the end of Chapter Five (pp. 79–82), Burgess and Burgess consider the possibility that what has been left out is the normative dimension, e.g. that *true* propositions are just those that are *permissible* to assert. On behalf of the deflationist, they suggest that although some such normative principle may well hold, what need not follow is that truth has a normative dimension *per se*. They recommend the following test for the latter claim: the normative principle must be “part of the very meaning of the truth predicate” (p. 80). Then, they attempt to tell a story where the normative principle is neither part of the very meaning of the truth predicate, nor even part of the very meaning of ‘assertion.’

Here is the gist of the story. To a first approximation, children learn particular instances the form:

- (a) It is permissible to use ‘*p*’ in ordinary circumstances if and only if *p*.

More precisely, children acquire knowledge of the norms disciplining language-use *piecewise*. However, we can give a *recipe* that indicates, for any sentence ‘*p*’, what it is that children are learning in a piecewise manner. The permissible conditions for

using ‘*p*’ in ordinary circumstances are learned to be those specified by using a sentence with the same propositional content as ‘*p*’. After acquiring these individual pieces of knowledge (probably tacitly), the children learn how to use ‘assertion’ and the truth predicate in order to generalize from these particular instances to the normative principle:

(b) It is permissible to use ‘*p*’ to make an assertion if and only if ‘*p*’ is true.

However, this normative principle is not built into the meanings of either ‘assertion’ or the truth predicate. Rather, children learn the meaning of ‘true’ just by learning the equivalence principle while they learn ‘assertion’ to refer to a kind of language-use that occurs in ordinary circumstances.

Of replies (1)–(3) on behalf of deflationism, it is this last reply that I find least convincing. In the remainder of this review, I will subject it to further scrutiny.

Before I do so, however, it is worth emphasizing Burgess and Burgess do not intend for the reply recounted in (3) to be especially conclusive. The intention is clearly to provoke further thought on the matter. Consequently, my remarks should merely be understood as carrying the discussion further rather than indicating any serious problem in the discussion as it is presented in the book. Indeed, the fact that the discussion in book does a good job at provoking further thought is a manifestation of the book’s success.

### 3. Problems with the Defense in (3)

When it comes to the reply given in (3), there are at least two obvious areas for concern. First, one might worry about the adequacy of the recommended test for determining whether truth has a normative aspect *per se*. The issue here is, of course, the nature of truth itself rather than the truth predicate or the concept of truth. Consequently, there is the theoretical possibility that although normativity is not part of the very meaning of the truth predicate, this is simply because not every feature of truth itself is reflected in the meaning of the truth predicate. For instance, the truth predicate might refer to a property with a normative dimension even though some competent users of the truth predicate are not aware of this normative dimension. Indeed, perhaps the inference from predicating truth to predicating permissible assertability (and *vice-versa*) is even *valid* (in a significant sort of way), but appreciating the validity of this inference requires more than merely grasping the meaning of the truth predicate. Maybe this appreciation requires more sophisticated insight. This insight might be empirically grounded, but it might also have a purely rational basis.

A second worry is that even if the recounted language-acquisition story is true, it is not sufficient to establish that a normative principle like (b) is not part of the meaning of the truth predicate. Consider the predicate ‘is a number’. I don’t know exactly what children learn when they learn this predicate, but it isn’t very far-fetched to suspect that they don’t learn everything that is part of the meaning of ‘is a number’. In fact, we might take seriously the possibility that one doesn’t really learn everything that is part of the meaning of ‘is a number’ until one is well into one’s mathematical studies at university. Indeed, we might think that, at some point in the past, nobody fully grasped the meaning of the predicate ‘is a number’; all competent users of the predicate merely had a loose grasp on this meaning. By parity of reasoning, perhaps children do not gain a full grasp of the meaning of the truth predicate until they find their way to normative principles such as (b).

In fact, these two worries give rise to a kind of dialectical dilemma. Consider (C):

(C) Merely competent users of a predicate fully grasp the predicate’s meaning.

Whether the first or second worry is more pressing for Burgess and Burgess depends on whether (C) is a constraint on meaning.

Suppose (C) is indeed a constraint on meaning. Then, the second worry isn’t so pressing. There’s no scope for worrying that there’s more to the meaning of the truth predicate than the children in language-acquisition story are learning *before* they find their way to normative principles such as (b). But, the first worry is pressing. Upon accepting (C), there’s no very good motivation for accepting the recommended test for determining whether truth has a normative dimension. It might really be that the conception of truth that comes with fully grasping the truth predicate simply leaves out the normative dimension of truth. To appreciate this dimension of truth, one may well need insight that goes beyond what a merely competent user of the truth predicate has.

Suppose (C) isn’t a constraint on meaning. Given that competent users may only have a loose grasp on the meaning of the truth predicate, it may well be that quite a bit about truth is built into the meaning of the truth predicate even though the nature of truth isn’t fully transparent to competent users. So, perhaps any normative dimension of truth also won’t be left out of the meaning of the truth predicate. This would vindicate the test that Burgess and Burgess recommend for determining whether truth has a normative dimension. So, the first worry goes away. However, this vindication comes at the price of greatly exacerbating the second worry. Now, there’s plenty of scope for worrying that while children have managed to become competent users of the truth predicate without construing truth as normative, still some or other normative principles are part of the meaning of the truth predicate. It’s just

that these normative principles are part of the meaning of the truth predicate that isn't fully grasped merely in virtue of being a competent user of the truth predicate.

Given this dialectical dilemma, I can't see that the language-acquisition story that Burgess and Burgess give—which, incidentally, I find plausible enough—does much to help the deflationist. It simply does not provide much reason to think that the deflationist has not left truth's normative dimension out of the theory of truth.

In fact, the position that Burgess and Burgess take in their defense of deflationism is vulnerable in at least one further crucial respect. One is left with the impression that they are conceding that there are two meanings that are viable candidates for the meaning of the truth predicate. One of these meanings has normative principles such as (b) built in while the other is a deflationary meaning that has only the equivalence principle. However, once it is conceded that there are two such viable candidates, then the theoretical possibility exists that the truth predicate could turn out to have the first normative meaning rather than the second deflationary meaning. *Even supposing* that this theoretical possibility is not realized—the truth predicate, in fact, has the second deflationary meaning—*still* it would appear that, in principle, there could be some truth\* predicate that had the first normative meaning. Corresponding to this truth\* predicate will be something—truth\*—that, unlike truth, has a normative dimension. Because the equivalence principle is also built into the truth\* predicate, the truth\* predicate would be just as useful a device for making generalizations as the truth predicate is. But, of course, the normative dimension of truth\* might make it a more interesting thing to study than truth; it might be that there are a variety of devices we might have used for making generalizations, but that one—the truth\* predicate—is singled out from the others by its strong connection with normative assessment. We might learn that deflationism is, strictly speaking, right, but there is something more interesting in the neighborhood of truth for which a deflationary theory is not adequate. It strikes me that this would be a fairly shallow victory for deflationism.

Of course, the initial impression could be misleading: perhaps Burgess and Burgess do not think that there are two meanings that are viable candidates for the meaning of the truth predicate. Perhaps they think that there is only the deflationary meaning (or, perhaps more accurately, deflationary meanings). But, if this is what they think, then the detour through language-acquisition is a bit of a red herring. Really, it wouldn't have matter whether children had acquired the truth predicate in part by learning that it was a feature of this predicate that using it involved making normative assessments of potential assertions. This would simply have been a way of acquiring the truth predicate that simultaneously involved internalizing a misconception about truth—that truth has a normative dimension. In that



case, the interesting question would be why there isn't a viable candidate for the meaning of the truth predicate that builds in normative principles such as (b).

#### 4. Concluding Thoughts

In the previous section, I argued that a defense that Burgess and Burgess give of deflationism is ineffective. They fail to effectively rebut the Dummettian claim that truth has a normative dimension. While my argument might be taken to indicate a weakness of their book, I hope that it, in fact, illustrates a strength instead. As I noted in §2, while *Truth* is a survey of recent work on truth, it is not written from a neutral perspective. I am sympathetic to their perspective on a number of points, which is why I included in §2 not only a point of disagreement but the points enumerated in (1) and (2) where I more or less agree with them. However, even the ensuing discussion on the point of disagreement should demonstrate the way in which a not-so-neutral perspective can be helpful. By taking a judicious stand on a variety of issues, Burgess and Burgess not only advance their own views; they help to focus opposition to those same views. As a result, they are quite good at directing conversation in a productive direction. This is exactly what one wants from a survey book of this sort, and why I would not hesitate to use this book in advanced undergraduate or graduate course on truth.