

Paul Horwich *Truth*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990. pp 136, ISBN 0631173153 (hb), 0631173161 (pb), œ27.50 (hb), œ8.95 (pb).

Horwich defends a minimal theory of truth. The minimal theory of truth is superficially like the traditional redundancy theory. But it incorporates, indeed centers on, the idea that the main point of having a concept of truth is to attribute it to sentences whose content one cannot explicitly produce. For example in "Nothing Wittgenstein said was true." This is an obstacle on which simple redundancy theories often stumble. Horwich, in fact, asserts a very strong version of the idea: for him it is essential to the concept of truth that one can apply it to sentences in languages other than ones own, and even to languages which do not yet exist, or which have greater expressive power than any present language. The appeal of the theory, if it works, is in its combining this very wide scope with a conception that can rightly call itself minimal.

The claim of minimality is that the theory specifies exactly what is required to have the concept of truth: all but no more. Other accounts of truth, for example those involved in theories based on naturalistic theories of reference or theories which relate truth to verification, could be added on to the minimal theory but are not required by it. (Horwich is sceptical of several such theories. But he is careful to make clear that his doubts do not derive from the minimal theory: it is consistent with many possible add-ons.) And what this minimal grasp of truth requires is that one understand for any proposition p that it is true iff q , where q is the translation of p into a suitable metalanguage. To understand this I do not need to have a translation of p ; I need only understand that there is some suitable biconditional and that p is true iff and only if the condition it specifies obtains.

Taken as a theory of truth rather than as a theory of what it is to have the concept of truth, this must amount, Horwich thinks, to an infinite set of Tarski biconditionals. In fact, since the theory is to apply to all possible languages it must include biconditionals for all languages, including languages that we cannot speak. So it is a

very infinite set. And there is no chance of axiomatizing it in a language such as English+current mathematics.

There is something very worrying about this as a 'theory' implicitly defining a concept. I take it to be in part just a device, almost a metaphor, though, for making Horwich's main point, which is that it is not the nature of truth which is at stake in most disputes involving the concept of truth. He discusses disputes about what the logical truths are, disputes about verifiability, about scientific realism, about vagueness, and about meaning. In all of these he argues that what is really at issue is not the nature of truth but various other things. I find much of this convincing, at any rate to the extent of being convinced that most of these questions do not turn on what the extension of 'true' is. (But then many controversies over, say, viruses, do not turn on the 'extension' of virus.)

The most interesting of these claims about the irrelevance of truth concern scientific realism. Horwich undermines both arguments that the success of a theory can sometimes be explained by its being true, in some naturalised-realistic sense of 'true', and arguments that the greater likelihood of some belief-acquiring methods to produce true beliefs can be explained by such a thicker truth theory. The undermining takes the form of claiming that all that can legitimately be explained in these cases can be explained by the minimal theory, while doubting the legitimacy of what takes more explaining.

Horwich makes some good points here. The whole topic is very confusing because it involves one of our most complex and baffling institutions, science. Consider a simpler case. We can explain why an animal, a bat say, can succeed in its environment by its ability to track the location of prey. So its survival is due to the truth of its representations of the location of prey. Notice that this explanation-sketch depends not just on the minimal truth of the representations but on their being true via a particular causal link. Notice also that it is not plausibly expressed in terms of specific representations and their truth conditions, for propositional equivalents of bat thoughts are not available to us. Still, bats have many true thoughts, and we can know this because we can know how they track their prey.

The aim of the scientific realist is to say something like this for scientific theory: its prey are fundamental physical properties. Since not all terms in all scientific theories do represent physically real properties, not all truths are true by virtue of thick causal relations of reference. So there is truth and truth. (The problem is: no one has put all this together right yet. Horwich is certainly right about that.)

Since all truths are lumped together on the minimal theory, all sorts of things have truth conditions. It is true that you should support our glorious leader iff you should support our glorious leader. Realists as well as adding to a minimal theory of truth subtract from it, for many such sentences will on a realist account not have truth conditions, or at any rate possess them in a different way. There is truth and truth. A related worry concerns context-dependence. Most sentences, for example those involving indexicals or vague words, will have truth conditions only relative to contexts. There is a potential infinity of kinds of context-dependence in all the possible languages the minimal theory wants to cover. Horwich does not really explain how truth in terms of the bare Tarski schema is to be applied to this whole variety, though he does discuss some particular example. On the other hand if one relates truth to reference and satisfaction one can see in the work of David Kaplan and others the beginnings of a general account of truth-in-context.

The largest context is the language a sentence belongs to. Since truth for Horwich applies to propositions rather than sentences he does not think he has to say much about the dependence of the truth of an utterance on the language it is assigned to. ("John knocked Mary up at her public school." This may be true in American and false in British, or vice versa.) That is a pity, because considerations about which sentences express which propositions, and about what argument-places assignments of truth conditions and truth values should be relative to, are related to strategies for dealing with semantical paradoxes, about which he admits the minimal theory has nothing to say. If a non-minimal theory could motivate a plausible line on semantical paradoxes it might claim to have uncovered an essential feature of truth about which the bare Tarski schema is silent.

You can see my bias. I take Horwich not only to have done a brilliant debunking of some extravagant claims about truth, but also to have given the beginnings of a very

plausible and philosophically subversive account of what it is to have the concept of truth. This is not the same as giving a theory of truth. (There are similar cases: one could understand what it was to have a moral code or to have a concept of a god, without giving a theory of morals or a theology.) These are hard questions, though. One undeniable virtue of the book is Horwich's direct manner of argument and his transparent prose. Read it and see for yourself.