

“Truth and God”

Geach (1982) is distinctly odd. On the one hand, it contains a fairly breezy dismissal of some serious theories of truth; on the other hand, it recommends some positive views about truth that clearly deserve much shorter shrift than the summarily dismissed theories.

On the first hand, Geach examines, and finds fault with, ‘the speech-act theory of truth’, ‘the correspondence theory of truth’, and ‘the redundancy theory of truth’. On the second hand, Geach asserts—and hints at a defence of—the following four theses:

1. All our true saying and thinking points to the True (a.k.a. God).
2. The life of the True is its thinking of—i.e. about—itself.
3. The True has voluntary causality because this is proper to beings that have discourse of reason.
4. By its will, the True brings about all true thinking and saying.

Geach begins by locating the need for a theory of truth in locutions like ‘Whatever the Pope says is true’. According to Geach, ‘we cannot extract something to the same effect ... no longer involving mention of truth’ (84). On its face, that seems wrong; consider: ‘For any p , if the Pope says that p , then p ’. Various authors, from Quine (1970) to Horwich (1998), have observed that the truth predicate serves a logical need that might be filled in other ways: e.g. propositional quantification (as above), or infinite conjunction (‘If the Pope says that grass is green, then grass is green; and if the Pope says that grass is red, then grass is red; and if the Pope says that snow is cold, then snow is cold; ...’), or generalisation over a sentential schema (‘we should accept all instances of the schema: *if the Pope says that p , then p* ’). Nonetheless, it is clearly correct that any adequate theory of truth must accommodate locutions such as the one that Geach mentions.

Speech-act theories of truth are tailor-made for cases like ‘Everything the Pope says is true’. As Geach observes, on speech-act theories of truth, this sentence would be assimilated to a sentence containing an appropriate performative verb, e.g. ‘I corroborate everything that the Pope says’. However, as Geach also observes, there are other sentences that appear to resist this kind of analysis. Consider, for example: ‘What Assange said is a scandalous revelation if true’. (The kind of objection that Geach is deploying here has many uses—see, for example, Geach (1960) (1965).) I agree with Geach that this objection is crippling for speech-act theories of truth.

Geach is also very short with correspondence theories of truth. According to Geach, the following objection is decisive: “Suppose A judges that Jupiter is round: call this judgment J_1 . If A reflects minimally, A will also be able to judge: My judgment that Jupiter is round is true; call this judgment J_2 . J_1 and J_2 clearly stand or fall, and indeed both stand, together: they are not made true on two different accounts. ... But on the theory of truth as correspondence to facts, J_1 ’s truth would be its correspondence to the roundness of Jupiter, and J_2 ’s truth would be its correspondence to quite a different fact, namely, J_1 ’s correspondence to the roundness of Jupiter. This is good enough reason to reject the theory.” (84) It is very unclear what Geach is arguing here. On the one hand, it seems evident that ‘Jupiter is round’ and ‘I judge that Jupiter is round’ are made true on two different accounts (just consider how matters stood in 1934, when my father was but five years old). On the other hand, it seems no less evident that ‘I judge that Jupiter is round’ and ‘I judge that my judgment that Jupiter is round is true’ are made true on two different accounts (since the former concerns my

judgment of Jupiter's shape, and the latter concerns my judgment of the correctness of my judgment of Jupiter's shape, and, at the very least, these two kinds of judgments could come apart with the passage of time—I could come to judge that my previous judgment of Jupiter's shape was incorrect). Note that this criticism can accept Geach's contention that his two judgments—whatever exactly their content might be—'stand or fall together': at a given point in time, I will judge that my judgment that Jupiter is round is true just in case I judge that Jupiter is round, but this is insufficient to establish that there are not two distinct judgments being made. Since Geach says nothing else against correspondence theories, I do not think that we should hastily suppose that they can henceforth be ignored. (See David (1994) and Horwich (1998) for further discussion of the prospects for correspondence theories of truth.)

Geach gives far more attention to 'the redundancy theory of truth', which Geach claims would render our key sentence as 'For any p, if the Pope says that p, then p'. Against this view, Geach claims that there is enough that is right in Frege's theory of indirect discourse to make this rendition of our key sentence 'illegitimate' (85). The difficulty that Geach discerns is that, if Frege's theory of indirect discourse is correct, then, for many substitution instances of 'if the Pope says that p, then p', there will be a 'shift in meaning' in what is substituted for the first and second occurrences of 'p'. While there is quite a bit to say about this, I think that it suffices to observe that the argument that Geach takes to establish that there is enough right in Frege's theory to justify this conclusion is far from compelling. On the one hand, there are many contemporary theorists—e.g. Salmon (1986) and Soames (2005)—who reject the claim that there is a 'shift in meaning' in what is substituted for the first and second occurrences of 'p'. On the other hand, there are more sophisticated understandings of variables and quantifiers that may accommodate the alleged 'shift in meaning' (see, for example, Oppy (1992)). So Geach's objection to what he calls 'the redundancy theory of truth' is plainly less than airtight.

Geach gives even more attention to a 'partial redundancy theory of truth' that he claims to find in Frege: namely, the view that the thought expressed by a sentence S is the very same thought that is expressed by the sentence 'The thought that S is true'. Geach notes that, given Frege's view, that sentences containing empty names in extensional contexts lack truth values but not senses, there will be cases in which a sentence S lacks a truth value even though the sentence 'The thought that S is true' does not—whence, by Frege's own lights, the 'partial redundancy theory of truth' cannot be correct. While this criticism of Frege seems correct, we have already noted that one might well elect to go in for more wholesale rejection of the Fregean package than Geach himself countenances (both here and in his subsequent discussion of Dummett's attempts to repair this particular puncture).

Having satisfied himself that no extant theories of truth are satisfactory, Geach proceeds to some ground-clearing in preparation for the statement of his own account of truth. The main claims for which he argues are: (1) sentences are not names; (2) sentences do not stand to anything in a name-like relation; (3) sentences are essentially dual in significance; (4) what a true sentence points towards is what its contradictory points away from; (5) there is a duality of semantic relations for sentences; (6) all true propositions point towards the True; all false propositions point away from the True.

There are many questions that one might ask about this 'ground-clearing'. In particular, one might wonder what could motivate invocation of 'the True', once we have given up the idea that there are things to which sentences stand in name-like relations. For the purposes of logic and systematic semantics, we have good reason to invoke 'truth-values'. If—following Frege—we insist on reifying or objectifying 'truth-values', then we end up, at least, with a commitment to 'the True' and 'the False'. (We here—and henceforth—set aside worries about whether we need more 'truth-values' in order to cope with sentences that are neither true nor false, etc.) If—apparently following Geach—we say that it is a mistake to reify or objectify 'truth-values', then it seems that we have equally good reasons to dispense with both 'the False' and 'the True': we can still say, in the absence of both, that true sentences 'have' the truth-value *true* and false sentences 'have' the truth-value *false*.

Furthermore, even if we accept Geach's contention that we do have good reason to accept the existence of 'the True', it is not clear that we would not then have equally good reason to accept the existence of 'the False'. Geach says that all true propositions point towards the True and all false propositions point away from the True. But it is only by pointing towards something else that something can point away from a given thing. True enough, you might ask me to point away from you: but, if I do not point at something else, then I am merely pretending to point away from you. In order for it to be the case that false propositions point away from the True, there must be other things at which those false propositions point—and, in the nature of the case, the most natural hypothesis would surely be that they point towards the False. (True enough, Geach says that 'pointing towards' and 'pointing away from' are metaphors that cannot be informatively explained or informatively analysed. But I am not here asking for explanation or analysis; rather, I am just following Geach's metaphors where it seems to me that they most plausibly lead.)

Finally, even if one accepts that pairs of contradictory sentences are alike related to single entities, one might well prefer an answer that Geach rejects: namely that pairs of contradictory sentences are related to facts (or true propositions, or the like). Geach dismisses facts on the grounds that (a) their individuation is uncertain; (b) the construction 'the fact that ...' has misleading surface features that disappear under proper analysis; and (c) postulation of facts to play the role assigned to them multiplies entities way beyond necessity (since we could clearly get by with just the True and the False, if not with just the True).

While it must be conceded that some theorists still harbour doubts about facts—see, for example, Neale (2001)—it is hardly in doubt that one can provide clear individuation criteria for facts, and that one need not accept Geach's construal of 'the fact that ...'. Moreover, one might naturally think that the way in which sentences get to point towards the True or the False is precisely by way of their correlation with facts, or true propositions, or truths, or the like. Because he accepts so much of the Fregean machinery, Geach happily accepts that there are thoughts – structured senses – that are correlated with sentences: but one could surely raise the same kinds of worries—about individuation criteria for thoughts and construal of 'the thought that ...'—that Geach raises in connection with facts; and one might surely think that 'representations' of thoughts could fairly readily be reinterpreted as 'representations' of propositions ('representations' of true thoughts could fairly readily be reinterpreted as 'representations' of facts).

While there are further objections that might be raised against Geach's 'ground-clearing', it seems to me that there is ample reason to think that we have not been given good reasons to accept his claim that all true propositions point towards, and all false propositions point away from, the True.

What about the further theory that Geach erects on the basis of his 'ground-clearing' propositions; in particular, what about his identification of the True with God. I confess to finding this barking mad. Geach says: all our true saying and thinking points to God. Against this, it seems to me to be evident that Theists and Naturalists ought to be able to agree on a theory of truth. Here, the theories that Geach dismisses point the way: there is no obvious reason why Theists and Naturalists could not agree on the speech-act theory, or the correspondence theory, or the redundancy theory (or the coherence theory, or the identity theory, or any of the other serious theories of truth that have done the rounds in the past fifty years). And, of course, Naturalists think that it is true that there is no God. But how, exactly, could our saying truly that there is no God point to God?

References

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