Introduction to and Commentary on Jennifer Hornsby's 'Truth: The Identity Theory'"

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JENNIFER Hornsby's 1997 paper, 'Truth: The Identity Theory', has been highly influential in making the identity theory of truth a viable option in contemporary philosophy. In this short introduction and commentary I will limit my attention to what distinguishes her theory and its methodology from the correspondence theory and the 'substantivist' methodology, and I will focus on issues that have not been widely discussed in earlier commentaries yet are central to the current debate on truth.[1] By 'the identity theory' I will mean 'Hornsby's identity theory'.

I. *Introduction.* The identity theory says that a truth-bearer is true if and only if it is a fact or is the *same as* some (appropriate) fact. For Hornsby the justification or *raison d'être* of the identity theory is mainly negative: 'the identity theory arises out of rejection of a correspondence theory' (p. 4); '[t]he interest of the theory derives from what it [is] opposed to philosophically' (p. 3); 'the identity theory is worth considering to the extent to which correspondence theories are worth avoiding' (p. 6). The key issue is the relation between truth-bearers and reality. The correspondence theory says that there is a 'gap' between truth-bearers (thoughts) and something *external* to them which explains their truth/falsehood. The identity theory says there is no such gap.

Hornsby could have tried to justify her theory by appealing to its avoidance of criticisms like the 'slingshot', directed at traditional correspondence theories. But although she says in a footnote that the slingshot criticism does not apply to her theory, she does not pursue this line of justification. She focuses on a more central issue to the correspondence theory, namely, whether truth requires a 'gap' between truth-bearers and reality, and she motivates the identity theory by objections, which she attributes to Frege (1918), Quine (1960) and McDowell (1994), to the 'gap' view.

Frege argued that truth does not come in degrees or 'respects'; truth requires a *perfect* correspondence between thought and reality, and perfect correspondence is *coincidence*. Hornsby interprets him as saying that 'there cannot be an ontological gap between thought ("an idea") and the world ("something real")' (Hornsby 1997, p. 6). Next, she

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[1] For other contemporary identity theorists, commentators on Hornsby, and Hornsby's responses see, e.g., Candlish (1999), Hornsby (1999), Dodd (1999, 2000), David (2001) and Engel (2001).

traces the 'no gap' view to Quine's attack on the *myth of the museum*: '[f]rom the identity theorist's point of view the correspondents of the correspondence theories of truth play the same role as the exhibits in the museum of the mind'. Most importantly for the contemporary debate, Hornsby   traces   the   'no   gap'   view   to   McDowell:

> [T]here is no ontological gap between the sort of thing one can ... think, and the sort of thing that can be the case. When one thinks truly, what one thinks *is* the case .... [T]here is no gap between thought, as such, and the world. [McDowell 1994, p. 27][2]

The identity theory is concerned with one aspect of the 'gap' question: whether there is a gap between *truth-bearers* and *facts*. One distinctive characteristic of the theory is its conception of truth-bearers as *thinkables*, a notion borrowed from McDowell. Thinkables, as Hornsby understands them, are neither mental nor worldly entities. They are *contents* of thoughts - entities that may be thought of as located in a Fregean realm of sense. 'The identity theory is encapsulated in the simple statement that true thinkables are the same as facts' (p. 2). By identifying facts with true thinkables (= true truth-bearers), the world plays no role in what the identity theory has to say about truth: 'there is nothing external to thought [truth-bearers, thinkables] ... in terms of which truth can be understood' (p. 17).

As a theory, the identity theory is anti-substantivist. Among the things it is designed *not to do* are give a definition of truth, analyze truth, provide an explanation of truth, look for the sources of truth, say anything which is metaphysically contentious, examine what people are doing when they investigate reality, and so on. 'Truth', according to the identity theory, is not a notion of substance that can be used in explaining other things. By introducing this notion into our language we do not add anything new to it. There is no more to truth than playing a certain technical (logical) role. Truth does not provide a new mode of evaluating truth-bearers. From the point of the view of the identity theory even Horwich's minimalist theory tries to do too much: 'to the extent that the minimal theorist wants to convey a deflationary message about truth, which is not already conveyed in the identity theorist's opposition to correspondence, the message has to be resisted' (Hornsby 1997, p. 16). This does not mean that the identity theory is vacuous: it takes a stand on what the bearers of truth are and, according to Hornsby, it also has resources for saying what people are doing when they are using language and for offering an interpretive account of truth. But it eschews everything concerning truth that goes beyond speakers and truth-bearers.

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[2] Others who connect the identity theory of truth with McDowell (1994) include Dodd (1995), Suhm, Wgemann & Wessels (1999), Engel (2001), McDowell (2005) and Fish & Mcdonald (2007).

Hornsby does not justify her anti-substantivist approach to truth beyond pointing to Frege's (1918) claim that truth is indefinable (which is itself justified on the grounds that due to the basicness of truth, a definition of this notion is bound to involve circularity or infinite regress). Possibly, she also obliquely appeals to McDowell's reasons for recommending quietism in philosophy; possibly, her anti-substantivism is rooted in her overall approach to philosophy, which emphasizes commonsense over theory. But there is no explicit justification of anti-substantivism in Hornsby's paper.

II. *Commentary.* By appealing to McDowell (1994) in motivating her theory of truth, Hornsby (along with Dodd 1995) made an original and important contribution to the contemporary debate on truth. The reason is that the basic problematics of the human cognitive situation that McDowell draws attention to is both central to truth and largely neglected in the current debate. Hornsby's weakness is that she limits her attention to one element of this problematics, the 'no gap' element, losing sight of the equally important 'gap' element, hence of the problematics itself. Let me explain:

McDowell calls for following Kant in recognizing the problematics of the human cognitive situation. This situation, as McDowell delineates it, is characterized by several polarities: mind and world, friction and freedom, concept and object. For true cognition to occur, '[h]uman minds must somehow be able to latch on to the inhuman structure of reality' (McDowell 1994, p. 77). Now, such a latching on requires two elements, a human *mind* and a *world* independent of it, hence *gap.* Latching on to the world is bridging or closing the gap (hence *no gap*). Both are essential for true cognition. In true cognition mind must be *constrained* by the external world (*gap*), but in a way that makes it possible for it to use the constraint to generate true cognition as distinguished from false one. McDowell's proposal is that the world, or that part of the world that constrains the mind in this constructive manner, is *thinkable.* That is, the constraint involved in true cognition, which is rational or conceptual, is itself *rational,* that is, involves, or is mediated by, *concepts.* Concepts, in turn, require *freedom,* hence true cognition has a substantial element of freedom. More specifically, McDowell proposes that concepts play a central role in the mind's latching on to the world *all the way.* That is, there is no gap between the use of concepts in latching on to the world and the use of pure perception. The kind of perception that is relevant for cognition is already imbued with concepts. This is the more specific meaning of the '*no gap*' element in McDowell's proposal. But McDowell is adamant that we must not neglect the crucial role of *external* constraint in this process (hence *gap*). Constraint by the external world (*gap*), he repeats time and again, is crucial for true cognition. Without it, what we regard as true cognition would be a mere 'spectre of a frictionless spinning in a void' (p. 18).

How is this relevant to the theory of truth? It is relevant in two directions: (a) The question of truth is central to the cognitive problem since the difference between failing and succeeding in latching on to the world is the difference between obtaining *false* and *true* cognitions. (b) The question of cognition is central to truth, since one of the central roles of truth is to distinguish between failed and successful cognitions of the world (latching-ons to the world), or set a standard for successful cognitions. Accordingly, a theory of truth cannot neglect external constraint by the world. But this crucial aspect of McDowell's conception is entirely missing from the identity theory of truth. External constraint plays no role in this theory.

Another way to arrive at this issue is to observe that if a theory of truth puts McDowell's cognitive problematics at its center, it faces a non-trivial challenge: How to account for the truth of human thoughts given the enormous complexity of the human cognitive situation. (How to account for the fact that true thoughts are products of the mind yet their truth is determined by the external world;[3] how to deal with the polarities involved in the cognitive situation, which pull us in seemingly opposite directions.) The problem is further magnified since, as McDowell rightly demands, we must avoid the traps of idealism on the one hand and a Kantian thing-in-itself / empiricist 'brute Given' on the other. But the identity theory cannot meet this challenge. First, identity, as a gap-denying relation, can play at most a limited role in an account involving gaps and non-symmetric relations (like 'latching on' to the world). Second, given the complexity of the cognitive situation involved in truth, it is quite unlikely that a theory as simple as the identity theory has sufficient resources to account for it. Third, given the importance of the McDowellian problematics for understanding true cognition (truth), it requires a substantive treatment, something the identity theory is not equipped to provide.[4]

Hornsby is quite aware of the fact that truth involves an independent reality (hence gap); indeed, she regards it as a virtue of her theory that it is compatible with commonsense realism. She is also aware that there is an important asymmetry in truth (which cannot be captured by identity), and that this asymmetry concerns an important aspect of truth, namely, that it is reality which determines the truth of our thoughts, rather than our thoughts which determine reality (Hornsby 2005, §4). But her theory does not account for any of these things, nor do any of these things play a substantial role in her theory. Why? I gather this is because she realizes that accounting for these characteristics of truth would require a *substantive* theory or truth and, moreover, a *correspondence*

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[3] To see that, and how, McDowell views the world as determining the truth/falsehood of a particular truth-bearer see his example in (2005, p. 85).

[4] In referring to McDowell's problematics, I focus primarily on the early lectures in his book. Whether any of my critical points applies to any of McDowell's views elsewhere in his corpus I will not be able to discuss here.

theory of truth (or something like it), but (i) she is anti-substantivist with respect to truth, and (ii) she sees no hope for a correspondence-like theory of truth.

The key to understanding the problem with Hornsby's attitude (namely (i) and (ii)) is provided by Hornsby herself. She concludes her paper by saying: 'I have promoted the identity theory, because I think that we have to find a position from which to avoid the false dilemmas that the theories currently on offer present us with' (p. 22). To see our way into a theory that meets the McDowellian challenge we must free ourselves from the false misconceptions and dilemmas that are commonly associated with theories of this kind.

Consider correspondence. From the point of view of the basic problematics of human cognition correspondence is a relation that seriously involves the human mind on the one hand and the world on the other, a relation that explains how the world constrains the mind in a way that gives rise to true cognition. Now, from the point of view of these concerns, whether the basic entities involved in this relation are *facts* or entities of other kinds (say, objects and properties) is a secondary, and *open*, question. But from the point of view of the *traditional* debate on correspondence the question of facts is the main question. Viewed traditionally, correspondence requires *wholes* of one kind to stand in some fixed relation to *wholes* of another kind, and the question is which *wholes* these are? But what Hornsby does not seem to see is that from the point of view of the McDowellian problematics the question of *wholes* or *facts* is merely scholastic. What we are interested in is *how* the mind latches on to the world to achieve true cognition. That is, our investigation is directed at the *routes* the mind can, does, and should, take into the world in order to attain true cognition. And this mean that it is an open question whether this route leads from whole sentences (whole thoughts) to whole pieces of the world (facts) or whether it proceeds by connecting language (thought) to objectual elements that are essentially *different* from facts. But the objections to correspondence mentioned by Hornsby do not apply to a (non-traditional) correspondence theory that does not require facts, a theory that *investigates* the correspondence relation and its relata rather than takes them as given.

In a way, Hornsby cannot consider a correspondence investigation of this kind, since such an investigation would in all likelihood be substantive, but Hornsby objects to a substantive study of truth. Hornsby might argue that nonsubstantive theories have some advantages over substantive theories. For example, a nonsubstantive theory is more "safe" than a substantive theory in the sense that it says very little about truth and as such it is unlikely to conflict with most of the true things that can be said about truth, hence is unlikely to be found incorrect. But is this really an advantage? McDowell is known for emphasizing the importance of not confusing *justification* with *exculpation*. Saying so little about truth that one cannot be wrong about anything substantive

concerning it grants one *immunity to blame*. But what a good theory needs is justification. A theory has to say enough so that on the one hand it is open to critical examination and on the other hand it teaches us something new about its subject matter – here, the structure of truth, given the complexities of the human cognitive situation.

Perhaps, however, a substantive theory of truth is impossible. Hornsby, as we have seen, points to Frege's claim that such a theory cannot avoid circularity. Is this a decisive objection? I think it is not, and the key to understanding why it is not is, following Hornsby's own counsel of freeing ourselves from false dilemmas and preconceptions. The view that any measure of circularity is fatal to a theory is tied to a specific methodology, *foundationalism*. The first step in overcoming Frege's objection is recognizing the availability of alternative philosophical methodologies, like *holism*, which sanction some measure and forms of circularity (and is, indeed, endorsed by McDowell). Holism, however, is traditionally assumed to be a coherentist methodology, incompatible with correspondence. The second step is to realize the falsity of this assumption. Holism licenses non-linear theorizing in principle, and this license can be used in a variety of theories, including theories directed at, and grounded in, reality. Holism focuses not on the order in which such theories are constructed but on the extent to which they contribute to our knowledge of a given subject-matter. It allows shifts in position within our system of knowledge, conceived as a Neurath boat, including shifts involving temporary and partial circularity (circularity that can eventually be eliminated, circularity that involves only parts of the theory, and circularity whose extent can be reduced in later stages of developing the theory). As such, it is especially suited to the study of subject-matters like truth. The viability of a substantive theory of truth using the holistic method is not undermined by Frege who had never considered this possibility.

There is much more to say about the issues discussed in this commentary, but my space is limited.[5] To clarify my criticism of Hornsby's paper, let me briefly respond to a question raised by Guy Longworth. Longworth suggested that there are two ways to understand my criticism: (1) The claim is that Hornsby does not provide a substantive account of the gap and the asymmetry involved in truth. (2) The claim is that her theory does not have the resources to provide such an account. My view is that if it is inherent in Hornsby's approach that the Identity Theory is anti-substantivist (as I believe it is), then the criticism is (2). If, on the other hand, Hornsby's conception of the Identity theory is compatible with a substantivist approach to truth, then the criticism is (1). In the latter case, the challenge I put to Hornsby is to

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[5] For more on (non-coherentist) holism, the substantivist approach to truth, and 'routes' of correspondence see Sher (1999, 2004, 2010, 2012, 2013a,b, and Forthcoming).

provide a substantive account of the gap and asymmetry involved in truth, one that is significantly an "identity" account.

The questions of substantiveness, correspondence, the relation between truth and cognition, and the focus of theories of truth are important questions that many of the seminal papers published in the *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* bear upon. The identity theory of truth falls on one side of these issues; I support the other. I hope that the problematics I focused on in these comments will stimulate a fruitful debate on these issues.

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