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Minimalism about truth: special issue introduction

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1 Overview

The theme of this special issue is minimalism about truth, a conception which has attracted extensive support since the landmark publication of Paul Horwich's *Truth* (1990). Since its initial publication, Horwich's book has become required reading for truth theorists and students alike. It not only cemented the deflationist thought that debates about the nature of truth can be fruitfully transformed into debates about the utility of truth predicates, but also re-oriented theories away from traditional metaphysical debates and concerns, such as whether a conception of truth must accommodate some form of metaphysical realism. Arguably, alethic minimalism is now the most dominant conception of truth on offer, and certainly among the most well-known.

Horwich's minimalism divides into two parts. One part is the minimal theory—so-called because of its form, although it is actually an infinite list of propositions. The other part is the minimal conception, which is a collection of philosophical theses, corollaries, and qualifications concerning the adequacy of the minimal theory. For instance, one qualification constitutive of the minimal conception is that paradoxical or paradox-generating propositions are excluded. Another is that propositions are the primary and proper bearers of truth. That instances of the equivalence schema,

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(E)⟨p⟩is true if, and only if, p

are sentences implies that the propositions comprising the minimal theory are instead those expressed by instances of (E), i.e., propositions of the form,

(E*)⟨⟨p⟩is true if, and only if, p⟩

Another of the core theses of the minimal conception is that the non-paradoxical instances of (E*) are both epistemologically and explanatorily fundamental. For Horwich, these instances are epistemologically fundamental since they are not based in anything more obvious or more immediately known; speakers have an underived inclination to accept them. And they are explanatorily fundamental because the minimal theory is said to be sufficient for explaining all the facts involving truth.

Horwich's minimalism has served as an appealing target for challengers and defenders alike, and is often mentioned as the standard bearer for deflationist theories. In part, this is at least because his brand of minimalism about truth intersects with many other literatures: paradox, implicit definition, bivalence, normativity, propositional attitudes, properties, explanatory power, meaning and use, and so forth. Deflationist sympathizers have introduced a few developments and emendations, while critics and other interlocutors have generated objections that have required further responses. Some of these works appeared in the first few years following the publication of the first edition of *Truth*. But others have appeared only in the last 5 or 10 years, indicating that interest in the minimalist conception continues to bloom and to be a highly fecund source for new ideas.

Some of those new ideas are collected here, in a special issue celebrating collectively the 25th anniversary of Horwich's *Truth* in 2015, Horwich's 70th birthday in 2017, and the 20th anniversary of the revised edition in 2018. The intent of this issue is overwhelmingly prospective rather than retrospective, however: it presents original work and fresh perspectives, including a new contribution by Horwich himself, that jointly offer au currant reflections on the current status and future promise of minimalism.

In crafting this issue, the guest editors self-consciously aimed to include a diverse array of scholars, with an emphasis on new voices and an international reach. Contributors also bring a wide range of theoretical commitments and philosophical perspectives; some aimed for new developments, while many others challenge minimalism with new critiques. The contributors are a mix of established senior faculty and up-and-coming junior faculty, stratified across all ranks, with many nationalities represented. Nonetheless, all submissions to the special issue were subjected to the standard professional process of double-blind peer review by two or more external referees. A necessary condition for publication was that each submission receive a minimum of two explicit and unambiguous verdicts of 'accept' by independent and external referees. Published articles were further reviewed by the guest editors and ultimately approved by *Synthese*'s editors-in-chief.[1]

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[1] We are grateful for the external referees who accepted the task of reviewing (sometimes multiple) iterations of submissions and resubmissions, for the professional editorial staff of *Synthese* who were very patient in guiding us through this project from its conception to publication, and for the editors-in-chief,

2 Outline of each contribution

The issue begins with Andrew Howat's paper, 'Constituting assertion: a pragmatist critique of Horwich's *Truth*'. For an opening salvo, Howat reminds readers that minimalists like Horwich have rested content with attacking a historically lazy caricature of pragmatism—a caricature which does little more than recycle Bertrand Russell's 'old canard' that pragmatists are standard inflationists who believe that p is true if, and only if, it is useful to believe that p. Drawing on insights from Brandom (1988) and Bar-On and Simmons (2007), Howat outlines a more felicitous characterization of the theoretical commitments of (Peircean) pragmatists. One of the main commitments, he argues, is that assertion, belief, and inquiry all tacitly rely upon the concept TRUTH; and in so relying, the concept TRUTH plays an explanatory role. Consequently, while pragmatists and minimalists can agree that linguistic expressions of the concept TRUTH primarily play the grammatical role of denominalization, it does not follow that denominalization exhausts the roles played by truth predicates. For pragmatists, there is not just an equivalence of content to be explained (away), but also a fact about what Howat calls the 'force-equivalence' between assertions involving the two sides of the T-biconditional.

The upshot is that the central thesis of the minimal conception—i.e., the so-called adequacy thesis that the minimal theory is sufficient for explaining all the facts involving truth—cannot be correct if the performative facts involving truth are not being sufficiently explained. Of course, as Howat anticipates (see also Wright, this issue), minimalists will deploy a further thesis about the purity of the concept TRUTH, which is used to effect a metaphilosophical distinction between the facts involving truth, like performative facts about the relationship between the concept TRUTH and assertion, belief, and inquiry, and the facts about truth per se. In response, Howat notes that pragmatists are not likely to accept so impervious a distinction as that between pragmatics and semantics, leaving pragmatists and minimalists in disagreement.

Howat ends his pragmatist critique of minimalism in an engagement with Brandom and Horwich over objections involving the aspects of the Frege/Geach problem and the problem of mixed discourse, the issue of the ambiguity of true, and the norm of truth.

The issue of ambiguity—or better, polysemy—is picked up by Katarzyna Kijania-Placek in her paper, 'Can minimalism about truth embrace polysemy?' She begins with several observations about linguistic ontology and the semantics of the axioms comprising the minimal theory, and is led to question whether Horwich's use theory of meaning can deliver an account of word meanings such that the replacement of 'p' in (E) by a propositional vehicle is closed to the effects of polysemy. Kijania-Placek advances Kaplan's approach to semantics, which defines expression meanings in terms of semantic rules that assign content in context, and then trains her attention to rule-based systematic polysemy in the case of indexicals and proper names. She concludes that there is tension between Horwich's minimalist conception of truth and use theory of meaning.

In their 'Truth, explanation, minimalism', and 'Three questions for minimalism', respectively, Cory Wright and Keith Simmons raise a number of basic concerns about Horwich's minimal conception and minimal theory, and offer critiques of the main theoretical virtue that the minimal theory supposedly has: explanatory adequacy.

For his part, Wright rehearses the three main moves that Horwich makes en route to the minimalist conception. Firstly, Horwich contends that traditional inflationary theories of truth systematically fail to explain certain facts about truth: specifically, why T-biconditional instances of (E) are true. Secondly, Horwich appeals to this failure (or rather—as Howat, Simmons, Wright, and others have observed—his contention of it) as a pro tanto reason that licenses what he calls a 'reversal of explanatory direction'. Thirdly, once reversed, Horwich has the minimalist assert that minimal theory adequately explains all the facts involving truth.

Wright argues that each of these moves fails. As he observes, Horwich's main objection to inflationary theories is not that they are descriptively inadequate; rather, their purported downfall is instead their explanatory inadequacy. Without necessarily endorsing inflationism, Wright demonstrates that minimalists' main objection to inflationism misfires on its own terms. In analyzing Horwich's so-called reversal of explanatory direction, Wright demonstrates that the reversal cannot involve a genuine transposition of explanantia and explananda, and that it leaves minimalists with the difficult burden of fixing all and only the facts to be explained, without circularity and without begging the question against inflationists. Finally, like Howat, Simmons, and others (this issue), Wright argues that the central thesis of the minimalist conception— the so-called adequacy thesis—cannot be made good. The premises of the argument can be accepted only if theorists are already ideologically committed to the principles of the minimalist conception: e.g., to construing facts propositionally rather than compositionally (see Betti 2015), to propositions, to offloading explanatory burdens onto supplementary theories, etc. Horwich's presentation of the minimalist conception is seductively simple and perspicuous in style; but, ultima facie, warns Wright, we should be wary of the theory it commits us to.

Like Wright, Simmons also exercises three concerns. The first concern involves a technical issue about the proper formulation of the minimal theory itself: (E*) must be regarded as a schema, and not—as Horwich claims—as a function from propositions to propositions. Along with Kijania-Placek, Wright, and others, Simmons concludes that the axioms can be identified only indirectly, in terms of sentences that express them. Since propositions appear to quickly outrun sentences, even with extensions of languages, it becomes unclear whether the minimal theory is an articulable theory. This result immediately puts pressure on the minimal conception, he argues, to bulk up with a far more detailed theory of propositions, along with specifications of further linguistic, grammatical, semantic, and alethic concepts. So not only does the minimal theory appear to be infinitely long, the minimal conception looms large upon inspection.

Simmons's next two concerns are whether the minimal conception is successful in bypassing the liar paradox, and—along with Howat and Wright(this issue)—whether the concept TRUTH plays an explanatory role. After presenting many different considerations regarding sentential and propositional forms of the liar paradox, he concludes that minimalists cannot simply point to the denominalizing role of truth in order to

bypass the paradox; for the paradox cannot simply be waived off without diminishing the minimal conception, but cannot be properly diagnosed or treated without bulking up the minimal conception even further. Finally, Simmons turns his attention to whether or not the concept TRUTH plays the very kind of explanatory role that minimalists cannot accommodate. He considers the phenomenon of assertion—presenting or putting forward a certain thought as true—and observes that to present p as being true is not just to present p. Assertion is different kind of performative act. Like Howat (this issue), Simmons concludes that the term true, as it appears in phrases like to present as being true, cannot be denominalized away as the minimalist suggests.

Teresa Marques's article, 'This is not an instance of (E)', picks up the thread of Simmons's second concern. She begins by rehearsing the four options that Horwich canvasses for treating the liar paradox: (1) reject classical logic and bivalence; (2) deny that the concept TRUTH coherently applies to propositions; (3) deny that there is a proposition expressed by the liar sentence; or (4) deny that the liar is an acceptable instance of (E) and restrict the minimal theory accordingly. In order not to accept inconsistency, Horwich opts for the fourth option and makes the ad hoc restriction. On this fourth option, the proposition expressed by the liar sentence is deemed to be epistemically indeterminate just in case it is not conceptually possible to know its truth-value, and this impossibility is semantically induced. Drawing inspiration from Simmons (1999) and Asay (2015), Marques amplifies the argument that Horwich's justification for the epistemic indeterminacy of the liar is unprincipled, and explores a contextualist treatment that denies that the liar sentence expresses a proposition.

Marques's focus is a contextualist treatment of Horwich's epistemic indeterminacy response to the liar paradox. In 'Intersubstitutivity principles and the generalization function of truth', Gupta and Standefer argue for a partial defense of Horwich's response to paradox, which requires some modification to meet all of (1)–(4). Without necessarily expressing sympathy with deflationism about truth, Gupta and Standefer have chosen to join with Horwich to show how classical logic is perfectly consistent with the generalization function of truth; the objections raised against Horwich by, e.g., Gupta (1993) still stand independent of any defense Gupta and Standefer offer here.

Horwich's treatment of the liar paradox seeks to restrict the minimal theory to non-paradoxical instantiations of (E) because to deny (1) 'cuts too deep'. In §10 (1998), Horwich writes:

> Given our purposes, it suffices for us to concede that certain instances of the equivalence schema are not to be included as axioms of the minimal theory, and to note that the principles governing our selection of excluded instances are, in order of priority: (a) that the minimal theory not engender 'liar-type' contradictions; (b) that the set of excluded instances be as small as possible; and—perhaps just as important as (b)–(c) that there be a constructive specification of the excluded instances that is as simple as possible. (1998: 42)

However, an objection from Field (2008) has shown that the minimal theory cannot fully support the generalization function of truth using the intersubstitutivity of 'A' and 'A is true' to deny that the liar sentence is an acceptable instance of (E). Gupta and Standefer align themselves with Horwich by showing that a weaker, uniform principle

of intersubstitutivity may be employed so that the generalization function of truth can be maintained without surrendering classical logic.

Many of the articles included in this special issue take issue with some aspect of Horwich's alethic minimalism. For his part, Cezary Cieśliński defends Horwich's minimalist conception. In 'Minimalism and the generalization problem: on Horwich's second solution', Cieśliński considers what would be required for minimalists about truth to overcome the generalization problem, i.e., the problem of explaining the facts about truth in generalizations such as everything Henk said is true (cf. Gupta 1993). Cieśliński proposes a formal addendum aimed at solving the problem by replacing psychological notions with an epistemic one. Specifically, he foregoes what he takes to be Horwich's psychological posits, and replaces them with the successor epistemic posit of believability. For Cieśliński, believability is just a weakened form of theory acceptance: a statement q is believable if, and only if, there is a reason to accept q that is sufficient to warrant rational acceptance of q, given the absence of reasons to reject q. Through an axiomatic theory, Cieśliński crafts a defense of minimalism that responds to the generalization problem without resorting to controversial assumptions concerning the disposition of acceptance. His strategy seeks to construct an axiomatic theory of believability that shows how to derive generalizations from basic axioms that characterize the believability predicate.

The final two papers in the special issue, Filippo Ferrari's 'The value of minimalist truth' and Paul Horwich's 'Is TRUTH a normative concept?' tackle the issue of normativity. Ferrari commences with some useful clarifications of what is intended in saying that truth is valuable. He then provides an argument showing that minimalists like Horwich may support the thought that truth is valuable without also inflating truth's nature. Ferrari takes the axiological challenge of truth to be whether a theory has the resources to explain the value of truth. From it, he carves off two concerns, largely due to Korsgaard (1983). On one hand, there is a question over the source of truth, i.e., where and how a certain value is grounded in the thing that is valued; on the other hand, there is truth's explanatory potential given that truth is valuable. Once this apparatus is set in place, Ferrari goes on to articulate a minimalist explanation of the value of truth that avoids commitment to an inflationary conception of value. The core insight, according to Ferrari, is that if human flourishing is intrinsically good, and thus valuable, then intellectual flourishing is extrinsically valuable; in turn, if intellectual flourishing is extrinsically valuable, then achieving truth through various forms of intellectual inquiry is valuable. Therefore, the correctness of our disposition to value true belief is derived from human flourishing, which is Ferrari takes to be consistent with a thin deflationary account of value.

Our special issue gives the last word to Horwich himself, who closes out the issue with a negative response to the question of whether or not the concept TRUTH is a normative concept. Horwich utilizes two arguments in opposition to a Dummettian argument supporting TRUTH as functionally normative. In the first place, he argues that the grounds required for the recognition of truth's value would have to be analytically true, i.e., that truth ought to be pursued and untruth avoided. Yet, since it is conceivable that the normativity of truth retains its normative forcefulness while at the same time not being analytic, the normative features of truth dissipate.

The second argument targets a special brand of Dummettian normativity leveled by Lynch (2004). Lynch has suggested that the inference from particular instances of the belief/truth norm to a generalized belief/truth norm is a path fraught by problematic assumptions, and his recommendation has been to move in the opposite direction: i.e., we believe each particular thing by inferring it from the value-of-truth generalization, not the other way around. Horwich, however, insists that generalizations are warranted by their independently credible instances, and that the inference from particular instances to generalizations results from some confusion related to our unwillingness to accept instances.

Horwich's third and final argument originates from friends of semantic inferentialism, who recommend that truth's normativity ultimately depends upon the normativity of meaning, which is in turn derived from the game of giving and asking for reasons. Horwich responds by showing how normativity, on their view, is not as robust as they have thought. TRUTH is 'merely a little bit normative', says Horwich, since disquotation captures a concept of idiolectal sentential truth free of meaning-related notions. Schemata (E) and (E*), which are enshrined in the minimalist conception, putatively capture the fundamental features of TRUTH without so much as a hint of normativity.

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