

# Does the predicate ‘is true’ specify a genuine property of assertions?

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Theorists are divided as to whether truth is or is not a *substantive property*. In a nutshell, those that maintain that it is, pragmatists, coherentists, and correspondence theorists among others, oppose deflationists who claim that ascribing truth to an assertion is nothing more, or little more, than simply making the assertion. Deflationists typically refuse to grant truth a metaphysical standing, although we must recognise deflationism is not just a statement about the metaphysical status of truth. Unfortunately, propriety is elusive to define in relation to truth, but to deny it is to say that truth is not a quality bestowed on truth-bearers, one that they possess;<sup>1</sup> or to say that truth is not the kind of philosophical entity apt for dissection into constituents and common to all true assertions; or to say that truth ascription is a mere convenience, a *façon de parler* that eases conversation and confers style; or to say that truth is in some sense a trivial logical fragment that all but disappears upon closer inspection. Intuitions and theories vary on the details of what it takes to be a property, but some or all of these premises are accepted in embracing deflationism. Whiteness, for example, is an uncontroversial property of snow, even if it is arguably a relational one; what deflationism rejects is the analogous property of truth-bearers.

I suspect that the question cannot be cogently replied to if we lack a minimal account of what truth-bearers, or assertions, are. If, for instance, we reject that truth-bearers are ontological, what implications does this have? Could we even begin to talk of predications to entities that are, in a manner of speaking, non-entities? Recall the Quinean maxim: “To be is to be the value of a variable”.<sup>2</sup> And to be the value of a variable is to permit predications. Can we quantify over truth-bearers? Some evidence suggests that we can: “Everything you said is utterly false!” sounds like a reasonable quantification over potential truth-bearers, unless language and logic are utterly divorced. But ontological problems are difficult to settle. Nevertheless, I tend to agree with Quine that the answers are somewhat relative to our interests and happily concede a bare, nominal existence to truth-bearers. Thus the groundwork is laid for the analysis of the title question.

Let us then suppose that we can meaningfully ask whether truth is a substantive property. Daniel Stoljar finely distinguishes which aspects of truth are denied by

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<sup>1</sup> Be they beliefs, sentences, statements, propositions, judgments, etc.

<sup>2</sup> Quine, “On What There Is”, *From a Logical Point of View*.

deflationism; speaking of two true propositions, he says:

Do these propositions share a property of being true? Well, in one sense of course they do: since they are both true, we can say that they both have the property of being true. In this sense, the deflationary theory is not denying that truth is a property: truth is the property that all true propositions have.

On the other hand, when we say that two things share a property F, we often mean more than simply that they are both F; we mean in addition that there is intuitively a common explanation as to why they are both F. It is in this second sense in which deflationists are denying that truth is a property.<sup>3</sup>

This should do nicely for the substantive property that we are affirming or denying: to wit, truth as the explanation common to all true propositions over and above the predication itself. Let us return to the property of whiteness: in explaining why we are justified in calling something white we first rid ourselves of all conceivable sources of doubt, such as that we are hallucinating, or that we are in bad light conditions. Then, when we have situated ourselves in the best cognitive contact with the purportedly white object, if we still perceive that object to be white, we conclude that we do so because it *is* white. That is, on the one hand there is our statement that the object is white, and on the other hand our conviction that something about the object—something *about reality*—causes our representation to be a certain way: we have eliminated all (or most) causes internal to our mind, physiology, or irrelevant external circumstances. The remainder is that extra ingredient present in all attributions of white, an *ineliminable* kernel of whiteness, which we promote to propriety in the sense that Stoljar talks about.

Though singularly ineliminable, we may distinguish between a property that is *atomic* (or intrinsic) and one that is *relational*. An atomic property is one that something possesses *simpliciter*, and a relational property is one that comes about through the possessor's relation with other objects. Of course, the distinction is far from perspicuous, but the dichotomy is not entirely defunct. The charge of an electron, for instance, is an atomic property: electrons have a charge of  $1.6 \times 10^{-19} C$  irrespective of their context. That a bucket of water feels warm to a cold hand, however, is an uncontroversially relational fact. Most properties share from both categories. Note that in the latter case, though we cannot legitimately speak of a warm object in isolation to the rest, we can still think of warmth as a genuine property ascribable to (and explained by) all objects that satisfy a specific objective condition: the condition of being at a relatively high temperature compared to our sense organs.<sup>4</sup> On this view of propriety as common explanation, then, being relational does not automatically disqualify a property.

How could truth fail to be a genuine property? I identify the following ways:

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<sup>3</sup>Daniel Stoljar and Nic Damnjanovic, "The Deflationary Theory of Truth", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

<sup>4</sup>I am ignoring the relativity to *individuals* of warmth ascriptions; it would complicate matters needlessly, and the argument still stands.

1. It may be possible to reduce truth to a complex of genuine properties so that the parent concept, i.e. truth, is analyzed away or eliminated. An exemplar of this sort of reduction is the anecdote of polywater,<sup>5</sup> a hypothetical form of water that was later found to be ordinary water contaminated by a number of organic compounds. In a very intriguing sense, parent concepts analyzed away in this fashion lose their reality. Again, we may appeal to Quine's characterisation to flesh out this mysterious claim: since we are not any longer interested in the parent concept (truth or polywater), we do not endorse it logically as a meaningful subject over which to quantify. In other words, it becomes a useless notion much like Hume's occult qualities and loses its status as a legitimate property. Not all reductions are deconstructive in this manner. Social trends may be reduced to the behaviour of individuals, for example, but the collective notion still remains a useful entity in its own right.<sup>6</sup>
2. Keeping in mind these points about the superfluity of concepts, truth may be eliminated by other means than reduction. It may simply be redundant at the outset—consider, for example, the annoying linguistic analogy of prepending “In my opinion” to a statement that is obviously an opinion. If truth is redundant in this sense, it is a vacuous notion that we can do without.
3. Truth may fail the test if it does not satisfy the minimal requirement of being intersubjectively universal. Take the concept of money. Is monetary value a property in the sense we have laid down above? I submit that it is—we *decide* that it is; monetary worth is indeed a paradigm case of a relational property, and though it cannot be construed to be mind-independently objective on any view, it is universally accepted.<sup>7</sup> To say the very least, it determines the lives of many and as such deserves a place in our ontology. If truth fails to be universal—that is, if it fails to *mean* the same thing to different individuals—then not only is there nothing in the world that corresponds to truth, but now we cannot even say that there is a stable socially- or mentally-constructed notion that figures in all rational endeavours.<sup>8</sup>
4. Stressing the genuineness of a property suggests something else: its *uniqueness*. A pluralist truth, as Crispin Wright suggests, directly questions the inherent monism of traditional theories. Uniqueness gives way, and instead of one property we may have a disparate collection of properties that we previously uncritically subsumed under a single heading.

Theories of truth handle these issues in different ways. We may hope to glean some insight from a short discussion of the traditional theories and the more es-

<sup>5</sup>Due to Railton. See “Naturalism and Prescriptivity” in *Social Philosophy and Policy*.

<sup>6</sup>What decides between a deconstructive reduction or otherwise is a crucial subject that I do not have the space to examine, but some of the useful concepts in the cluster of relevance are ontological economy and superfluity. We try and preserve an adequate network of concepts that has enough explanatory power while maintaining ontological economy. Concepts that do not bring much to the table in terms of explanation are deemed superfluous.

<sup>7</sup>There may be exceptions, of course.

<sup>8</sup>This presupposes that “common explanations” embody the very essence of universality; not an unreasonable assumption.

tablished contemporary ones. *Correspondence theories* maintain that truth is a relationship or structural isomorphism between the way things are in the world (*facts*, we could say) and propositions or truth-bearers. We need not get bogged down in the details of *which* are the truth-bearers and what their ontological status is, as long as we observe that this view affirms the substantivity of truth as a relational property. Correspondence theories date back to the infancy of philosophy, as evidenced by Aristotle's assertion that truth is claiming "of what is that it is, or of what is not that it is not".<sup>9</sup> A popular variant of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was the *logical atomism* of Russell and Wittgenstein. In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein propounded a "logico-pictorial" view of the relationship between structures of propositions on the one hand, and facts on the other.<sup>10</sup> Russell proposed a view akin to this that gave more consideration to matters epistemological, but both ultimately suffered from the same problem: correspondence as construed by (the early) Russell and Wittgenstein was a rigid relation that involved metaphysically dubious assumptions about how the world ought to be carved up into atomic parts. This view, which Grayling calls the "congruity" interpretation of correspondence,<sup>11</sup> offered an inflexible one-to-one coupling of proposition and fact that is difficult to corroborate by linguistic evidence. To what, for example, do the atomic constituents (if there are any, indeed) of "Racism is unacceptable" correspond? What about sentences that refer to huge collections of purportedly elementary objects, such as planetary nebulae?<sup>12</sup> The "correlation" interpretation of correspondence, as exemplified by Austin's theory of conventions, allows some slack into the equation: the relationship is now arbitrary to an extent, fixed by convention so that it escapes the metaphysical conundrum encountered earlier.<sup>13</sup>

*Coherentism* holds truth to be a manifestly relational property, but one of a different kind: truth-bearers possess the property if they form part of a coherent set.<sup>14</sup> One of the main difficulties lies in formulating a convincing explication of the coherence relation. It seems that consistency is a key virtue, but surely it is not enough. Do we then also require logical entailment?<sup>15</sup> The answer is negative; entailment is far too strong, for we scarcely ever perceive logical relationships between arbitrarily removed subdomains of what we hold true, a point made all too clear by Lehrer in declaiming against theories of stars implying truths about mice. Ewing relaxed the relationship so that now "any one proposition in the set follows with logical necessity [only] if all the other propositions in the set are true".<sup>16</sup> But this characteri-

<sup>9</sup>Aristotle, *Metaphysics*.

<sup>10</sup>Propositions decompose into elementary propositions that in turn decompose into names, and this structure is mirrored by a decomposition of facts (*Tatsache*) into states-of-affairs (*Sachverhalt*) which further decompose into objects (*Gegenstände*).

<sup>11</sup>A. C. Grayling, *An Introduction to Philosophical Logic*, pp. 142–143.

<sup>12</sup>"Planetary nebulae are vast interstellar objects": we can either break down the nebulae into tiny constituents, in which case the sentence becomes nonsensical, or accept that the elementary objects are the nebulae themselves, effectively contextualising the elementariness of names and objects to the level of description.

<sup>13</sup>Austin's proposals were not free of problems, but we need not go into that.

<sup>14</sup>Coherentism does not lend itself to *sentences* being the desired truth-bearers: how would sentences, as mere strings of noise or scribbles of ink, be said to cohere with one another?

<sup>15</sup>A view held at one point by the American idealist Blanshard.

<sup>16</sup>A. C. Ewing, *Idealism: A Critical Survey*.

sation is somewhat vague and seems to demand completeness. Variants of coherentism have been espoused by many philosophers including Kant, Neurath, Quine and Rescher—and denounced by a fair share of others. A major objection to any respectable coherence theory is that it is too allowing: Russell complained that every statement will plausibly cohere with *some* coherent set, but that we do not just take any coherent set to be the truth. In response to this, Rescher attempted to cut down on the myriad candidate sets by suggesting we employ a “plausibility filter”. Another objection due to McGinn commits coherentists to idealism, an unpopular epithet in the harshly realist climate of this age.<sup>17</sup>

Then there are *pragmatist* theories of truth, brought onto the scene by the late 19<sup>th</sup>–early 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophers Peirce, James and Dewey, and recently revived in the work of Rorty, Putnam, and other thinkers. On a pragmatist account—of which there are many variants—truth is in some sense what is practical or fruitful in terms of experience; meaning in general is to be construed in the light of experiential cash-value, and truth follows suit. A particularly influential version was that of William James, who held that true beliefs are those free of revision from recalcitrant experiences and therefore confirmable (or *verifiable*) in the long run. Elements of his theory had a coherentist flavour and would later resurface in Quine’s work, especially in the notion of a “web of belief” that accommodated experiences by significant revision. James had a nominalist streak and shied away away from unverified truth—so much so, that he seemed to suggest that the process of verification had a *truth manufacturing* ability. This faced the obvious retort that truth manufacturing and truth as verifiability are unlikely bedfellows, a tension that James did not resolve. The theory also received much misplaced criticism by Russell and Moore because of James’ repeated use of the terms “expedient” and “useful” in order to describe truth. What is expedient to believe, they said, is not always true,<sup>18</sup> nor is that which is useful. But this was never James’ agenda: “*The true, to put it very briefly, is only the expedient in our way of thinking, just as the right is only the expedient in the way of our behaviour.*”<sup>19</sup> Another substantial criticism is that pragmatism, in tying up truth so closely with the knowing individual’s perspective, leans too heavily toward subjectivism. Whatever the verdict may be it is interesting to note, in relation to point 3., that traditional pragmatism affirms the intersubjective universality of truth; this suffices for the common explanation we seek as the basis for a substantive property.<sup>20</sup>

*Deflationism* comes in all shapes and sizes. *Redundancy* theories have it that the truth predicate “is true” is redundant—it does not add anything new to the meaning of a statement. This is illustrated by noting that sentences like “It is true that Plato was born in a wealthy family” can be simply restated by dropping the predication: “Plato was born in a wealthy family” has the same meaning and content, if not the emphasis, of the first sentence. Redundancy runs into problems when we can refer

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<sup>17</sup>This allegation was successfully rebuffed.

<sup>18</sup>An objection loaded with moral baggage.

<sup>19</sup>W. James, *Pragmatism*.

<sup>20</sup>This sort of epistemologically universal truth is already far removed from the notion of a metaphysical truth. Neopragmatists like Richard Rorty supply the last links and attack this remaining claim to substantivity.

to, but not know the content of, the pertinent truth-bearers, as in “I cannot remember all that was said, but whatever she said was true.” This is a valid use of words that we normally attribute with truth or falsity, but the predication of truth in the statement cannot be so easily eliminated. *Minimalism* addresses this problem by restating the insubstantiality of truth with a single caveat: truth is only a property in so far as it allows us to make logical predications to unseen propositions of the previous class. Equivalently, it is that property which satisfies all instances of the schema “The proposition that P is true if and only if P”. Whether this *is* a substantive property or not is moot; it must be noted, however, that if we follow our explication of substantivity to the letter, a logical property, in being presumably universally applicable, must serve as a common explanation and is therefore substantive. This is indeed endorsed by many minimalists:

Depending on one’s views about what it takes to be a property, then, one might be tempted to say here that being true is not a property, because it is not like being a mammal. But in fact most contemporary deflationists, pursuing the analogy between truth and existence, describe truth as a logical property (for example, Field 1992: 322; Horwich 1998a: 37; Künne 2003: 91).<sup>21</sup>

What they deny, instead, is that there is anything *more* to truth. Minimalism is pitted against our intuitions: we just seem incapable of eliminating the use of truth as a bona fide concept that goes beyond the barely logical. Consider everything from the shallow misuse of the word in political propaganda to the severe social stigma against the utterance of untruth; truth is pre-rationally a strong driving force and a normative goal, and if we are yet again to accept Quine’s words on the subject, we seem bound to accept it into our ontology. Other objections have been raised (Horwich considered thirty-nine of them!), with the sentential-propositional question being salient, as well as the apparent lack of reply to the Liar paradox. In a similar vein, *disquotationalism* maintains that truth is that which satisfies disquotation, that is, all instances like “‘Snow is white’ is true if and only if snow is white”.<sup>22</sup> Finally, Strawson’s *performative* theory considers truth predications to be mere endorsements of statements. Though often subsumed under the same taxonomic labels as redundancy, the performative theory assigns truth a universal role that warrants the title “substantive”.

I have examined a few general ways in which the substantivity of truth can be rejected or endorsed, together with theories that give positive accounts of the notion and indirectly answer the question. Many theories tend to embrace my second point above in their deflation of truth, but minimalism and, to some extent, the performative theory, cannot be properly said to denounce its *universality*. Nevertheless, all of the accounts I mentioned have problematic aspects, even though most philosophers are inclined towards some form of correspondence.<sup>23</sup> Thinking about truth in the abstract is very difficult because of the fundamental role it plays with respect to

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<sup>21</sup> Daniel Stoljar and Nic Damnjanovic, “The Deflationary Theory of Truth”, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

<sup>22</sup> Developed around Tarski’s theory by Quine.

<sup>23</sup> A 2009 survey by PhilPapers.org concluded that of 3226 respondents, 44.9% leant towards correspon-

rationality, and we will probably make little headway by merely considering the title question in isolation. Besides, I feel a strong epistemological grounding is needed in order to help hold the notion as close to the human perspective as possible.<sup>24</sup> Can we make precise this idea of propriethood? I suspect not; and does this mean that the question is meaningless? Not necessarily, for as we know, precision is not a necessary mark of existence, but it does mean that we have to be careful by qualifying our response—at the very least, we ought to explain *what* we are affirming or denying. Finally, agreement in use leans towards a linguistically universal truth, and this may very well be a sound basis—in its being an irrefutable datum of meaningful communication—for a substantive truth.

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dence, 20.8% towards deflationism and 13.9% towards epistemic theories, with the implication being that only a small number accepted coherentist truth.

<sup>24</sup>Too many discussions risk going off on unchecked metaphysical tangents.