

Müller, Vincent C. (1999), 'Review of Crispin Wright "Truth and Objectivity" (Harvard University Press 1993)', *Erkenntnis*, 44, 119-23. ([www.sophia.de](http://www.sophia.de))

---

Crispin Wright, *Truth and Objectivity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. & London, © 1992, published 1993, xi+247 pp. \$ 29.95 (cloth), \$ 14.95 (paper, 1994).

This book is a new attempt to clarify what is at issue in the contemporary realism debates and to suggest which form the controversies ought to take. Wright has contributed to these debates for quite some time and essentially taken the anti-realist side (witness the papers collected in *Realism, Meaning and Truth*, 1987, <sup>2</sup>1993, and the forthcoming *Realism, Rules and Objectivity*, both Oxford: Basil Blackwell). In *Truth and Objectivity* however, he takes a step back and sketches a neutral ground upon which both sides could agree in order to define their oppositions clearly, thus enabling fruitful discussions. His methodological suggestion for a realism debate in a given assertoric discourse is that both sides should agree on a "minimal" concept of truth for that discourse and then see whether ascent to a more metaphysically substantial concept of truth is warranted, which would constitute a realism for the discourse in question. If Wright had managed to set the agenda in a way that does justice to both sides, this book would have constituted a major contribution to contemporary epistemology and metaphysics.

Wright presents his minimalism as the result of a critique of deflationism about truth, which is said to show "a tendency to inflate under pressure" (13). According to Wright, deflationism amounts to saying that the content of the truth predicate is wholly fixed by the disquotational schema

"*p*" is true if and only if *p*

plus the contention that claiming a sentence to be true is the same as asserting it – in Wright's terminology: For a linguistic practice, truth *registers a norm* that does not differ from that of warranted assertibility. Wright "inflates" this claim via the consideration that despite the usual coincidence in normative force, there is a potential extensional divergence of truth and warranted assertibility: in a neutral state of information concerning a statement, the absence of warrant does permit the use of "not warrantably assertible" but not that of "not true". So, "true" and "warrantably assertible" register distinct norms, "... distinct in the precise sense that although aiming at one is, necessarily, aiming at the other, success in the one aim need not be success in the other" (19). This "fundamental and decisive refutation to deflationism" (21) – which may well be read as an elaboration – serves to explain the pluralistic notion of minimal truth: Any predicate that agrees with the disquotational schema, whose normative force coincides with warranted assertibility but potentially diverges in extension will qualify as a truth predicate. A truth predicate must also satisfy a set of (alleged) *platitudes* (34, 72), linking truth with assertion and negation:

“*p*” is true if and only if things are as “*p*” says they are

to assert is to present as true

to be true is to correspond to the facts

a statement may be justified without being true, and vice versa

any truth-apt content has a significant negation which is likewise truth-apt.

In this pluralist view, some minimal truth predicate or other can be found in the various assertoric discourses such as morals, physics or the comic (to mention Wright’s favoured example). This is the truth predicate that is to serve as the basis for discussions between the realist and the anti-realist in that discourse. According to Wright, the anti-realist will argue that a minimal truth predicate is all that can be had in the domain in question – in this sense, the minimalist is an anti-realist (174) – whereas the realist will claim that a more substantial notion is needed and can be warranted.

The second half of the book is devoted to the course realism debates ought to take in certain domains once a “default” minimal truth predicate is challenged and it is in this part that Wright offers both intriguing discussions of familiar points of dispute as well as new ones. He suggests three main areas of disagreement:

- (I) *Cognitive Command*: A discourse exhibits cognitive command if there is more than just a tendency of people to agree but “It is a priori that differences formulated within the discourse, unless excusable as a result of vagueness ... will involve something which may properly be regarded as a cognitive shortcoming” (144). Such a cognitive shortcoming could be for instance lack of information, malfunction, etc. Cognitive command is a necessary but not a sufficient feature of realism (148, 175); it is supposed to be at issue in debates about convergence of knowledge (93) and in *cognitivist* vs. *non-cognitivist* views. An example for a discourse lacking cognitive command is that about the comic.
- (II) *Euthyphro Contrast*: While Socrates and Euthyphro in Plato’s *Euthyphron* agree on which acts are pious (their concepts are coextensional), Socrates is what Wright calls a “detectivist” and says: “It is because certain acts are pious that they are loved by the gods” whereas Euthyphro is a “projectivist” and says: “It is because they are loved by the gods that certain acts are pious.” (79, 108) This difference between what may be called *tracking* facts and *constituting* them by best judgement can be used to distinguish primary and secondary qualities (and thus to discuss supervenience) or to contrast “hard science” and morals.
- (III) *Cosmological Role*: In moral realism and in the philosophy of science debates about theoretical physics it has been suggested to test for *best explanation*: In the best explanation of someone’s having a true belief, it is necessary to make men-

tion of the relevant states of affairs themselves? After his analysis, Wright suggests that this is hopelessly muddled due to the problem of what is to count as the *best* explanation (190): The intuitive issue really is the *width of cosmological role*: A discourse has wide cosmological role if the kinds of states of affairs it deals with are potentially contributive to the best explanation of beliefs (and other attitudes) about *other* kinds of states of affairs. In the hope that this is more elucidating than best explanation, it could serve as a sufficient condition for realist truth that seems to apply to physical facts since they can serve in the explanation of many kinds of attitudes, thus going beyond minimal truth aptitude, whereas moral facts do not have wide cosmological role.

Wright concludes the book with a subtle discussion of *quietism*, the view – allegedly Wittgensteinian – that *both* realism and anti-realism are just futile metaphysical attempts to step outside one’s own skin. Roughly speaking, this subversive view is rejected as failing to establish a position *outside* the debates between realism and anti-realism. (Strangely, the subversion of the realism debates in Richard Rorty’s writings is not mentioned in the book.)

Even though Wright’s discussions of minimalism and the ascent (149, 175) to realism are lasting contributions, it remains doubtful whether the suggested overall structure of the debate does justice to the subject. The suspicion must be that Wright fails to take a neutral stance when all the burden of proof is put on the realist who has to justify his here-sy from the minimalist orthodoxy: “... the *general* rule should be that realism must be earned” (149). We can see that this is to shift goal posts, if we take a look at the presumed role model of a minimal truth predicate (60), Wright’s familiar superassertibility:

A statement is superassertible, then, if and only if it is, or can be, warranted and some warrant for it would survive arbitrarily close scrutiny of its pedigree and arbitrarily extensive increments to or other forms of improvement of our information. (48)

Even if the realist is willing to accept the methodological suggestion of pluralism about truth predicates, he will not wish to discuss whether there is any need to go *beyond* this truth predicate but rather whether it really *is* a truth predicate at all. Since he rejects epistemic concepts of truth, he will say that a statement can be true even if it is *not* superassertible, so there are instances of the disquotational schema which superassertibility does not imply: it is not a minimal truth predicate on Wright’s own criterion. The debate about this disagreement will be a realism debate (cf. 78). To be sure, there is a minimal consensus underlying that debate, namely that any truth predicate must satisfy the disquotational schema, but this is something we have known since Tarski (who is not mentioned in the book) and it is less contentious than Wright’s inflated minimalism. In fact, the realist may turn the weapon of minimalism against Wright and argue: realism is to stick to the plati-

tudes, to charge them with epistemic considerations is an ascent that stands in need of justification (after all, it has been the anti-realists who have argued for more “substantial” notions of truth in the past). What is at issue between the two sides is not whether to go beyond the disquotational schema or not, but what follows from it, how to interpret this consequence and in which direction to go beyond the schema, if at all. What is more, Wright has not argued for his conviction that the relevant debates should be couched in terms of a “truth theory” at all.

The fact that minimalism goes beyond the bare disquotational schema renders it unsuitable as a common ground for both sides in other respects as well: Wright argues at length that truth and warranted assertibility coincide in normative force and that coinciding in normative force with warranted assertibility is a necessary requirement for a minimal truth predicate. Typically, the realist will *deny* this intimate connection between the norms guiding the use of a predicate and their function in true propositions, in which case some coincidence in normative force is an accidental feature, rather than a necessary requirement for a truth predicate. In particular, he may very well wish to define a truth predicate that does not coincide in normative force with warranted assertibility; where aiming at truth is not necessarily aiming at warranted assertibility.

The fact that the central issue of *reference* and its determination by sense or by “the world” is not mentioned by Wright is equally due to his agenda to swallow minimalism for a start, thus missing out on the underlying question of the relation between reference and *episteme* and its relevance for a realist stance.

Even if we doubt the neutrality and fruitfulness of inflated minimalism and the ensuing agenda, there is a lot of material here to structure the debate in a fruitful way. The book contains highly illuminating discussions of many aspects of the debates and many loose ends to grasp and develop. We should pay heed and see what Wright himself and others make of them. While the “discussion notes” at the end of each chapter will stimulate debates, the scarcity of references in the text and the lack of a bibliography are serious drawbacks. We are still in need of a satisfactory framework for the realism debates but participants in the debates cannot afford to miss this book.

Philosophisches Seminar  
Universität Hamburg  
Von-Melle-Park 6  
D-20146 Hamburg  
Germany  
E-mail: 100333.2033@compuserve.com

VINCENT C. MÜLLER