Realism and Truth: A Comment on Crispin Wright's Truth and Objectivity

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You can be a realist about any area of talk or thought, so everyone agrees, only if you treat the discourse as knowledge-seeking or cognitive in character. You must see participation in the discourse, not as a matter of giving orders or expressing wishes, for example, but rather as an exercise in offering answers to various implicit and explicit questions. But what is it, then, actually to be a realist about the discourse? What does realism involve over and beyond such cognitivism?

Crispin Wright gives this familiar sort of question an interesting cast. He takes the concept of truth as that which is fixed by the disquotational schema '"P" is true if and only if P' and argues, by a distinctive route, that this concept directs us to a property distinct from that of warranted assertibility; this is the property of minimal truth which he characterises as 'substantial', if metaphysically 'lightweight'. As I asked what it is for a discourse to satisfy realism as well as being cognitivist or knowledge-seeking, he asks what it is for the discourse to satisfy realism as well as being apt for minimal truth: as well as being capable of being true or false in his minimal sense. He takes aptness for minimal truth to be a matter of satisfying the 'constraints of syntax and discipline' associated with assertoric form (29, 35–36) and so it seems natural to assume that realism must involve more than a belief in such truth-aptness.

Should we accept Wright's recasting of the question? I am prepared to do so, though I should record misgivings about the assumption that aptness for truth—even for minimal truth—is just a matter of satisfying certain constraints of assertoric syntax and discipline (see Holton 1993). Even though truth is minimal, aptness for such truth may involve substantial requirements: it requires that the discourse in question is capable of expressing bona

fide beliefs, for example, and by Humean accounts that would mean that the discourse cannot be inherently action-guiding (Smith 1993).

So what does realism involve over and above the ascription of aptness for (minimal) truth? Wright finds common ground with most thinkers in the area when he recognises that realism certainly involves the rejection of error-theory and idealism. Error-theory would say that, truth-apt though they may be, the claims of the discourse are massively mistaken. Idealism would say that, even if many of the claims are true, the entities that they distinctively posit—the objects or properties or whatever—depend for their very existence on being the subject of the discursive activity. But Wright suggests, plausibly, that there is often more to the defence of realism about a discourse than the claim that it is truth-apt and that error-theory and idealism do not apply. He observes that discourse about the comic is truth-apt and that it is hostile to error-theory and idealism: it is not just expressive of amusement, for example; it is not massively false; and it does not conjure the property of being comic into existence (even if the property, as many will think, involves a relation to human responses). But still, he says, discourse about the comic does not intuitively deserve to be regarded in a full realist light (7–8). Thus he asks after what else is likely to be involved in realism besides the rejection of such positions.

The sort of answer we might well have expected is that while many discourses may enjoy aptness for minimal truth and indeed a measure of minimal (non-idealist) truth itself, some discourses enjoy such aptness and such truth in relation to distinctively free-standing truth-conditions and these are the discourses that merit a realist gloss. Here are some ways the truth-conditions of a discourse might be distinctively free-standing (see Pettit 1991).

1. The truth-conditions are not definable in terms of the truth-conditions of any more familiar discourse, or effectively eliminable in favour of them, as in reductivist or fictionalist claims that questions about the mind are really just questions about behaviour, or questions about objects really just questions about phenomena.

2. They are not implicitly indexed to some individual or group, as in relativist visions, so that the right claim for you or yours may not be the right answer for me or mine.

3. They are not such that only those in a certain coterie, those of a certain background or bent or whatever, can allegedly understand them, as in incommensurabilist philosophies.

4. Their fulfilment is not fixed, more or less arbitrarily, by our individual or group fiat, as in a conventionalist view of things.

5. They are not subject to failures of bivalence, at least of the kind envisaged by Dummettian anti-realists.

6. They are not such that evidentially favoured judges would enjoy a certain infallibility in relation to them, as in internal-realist stories.[1]

Wright does not explore the line—as I see it, the natural line—that what the realist claims about a discourse is that it enjoys aptness for, and a measure of, minimal (non-idealist) truth in relation to truth-conditions that are free-standing in the manner illustrated by these clauses. He ignores the possibility that truth is a univocal or monistic property, definable in relation to truth-conditions that vary in the realism-relevant ways that I have illustrated. Instead, he goes for the idea that by realist lights truth comes in many kinds and that what distinguishes the discourses favoured by realism is that they enjoy something more than minimal truth; they enjoy different, more robust kinds of truth. He describes the minimal kind of truth associated with the disquotational schema as metaphysically lightweight. Using the same metaphor, we might represent him as claiming that for the realist truth can come in heavier weights—welter-weight, middle-weight, cruiser-weight... —and that some discourses score over others in these regards.

There are lots of things that I like about Wright's approach, and I have learned much from it. But I am not happy about this option for a kinds-of-truth approach: this pluralism about truth, as he himself describes it (see Jackson forthcoming for a similar reservation). As indicated, I think that we can capture the idea that realism involves more than the ascription of truth-aptness, and the rejection of error-theory and idealism, while holding onto a monism about truth: a monism that keeps truth minimal in all discourses.

It may be thought that there is something about Wright's methodology that presses him towards a pluralism about truth. He conceives of the disquotational schema as a platitude that the truth-predicate in any discourse must respect and, in particular, as a 'parent platitude' which generates platitudes about negation, correspondence, and the distinction between truth and justification (74): the platitudes, as he puts it, 'that to every assertible content corresponds an assertoric negation; that a content is true just in case it corresponds to the facts, depicts things as they are, and so on; [and] that truth and warrant are distinct'. (72) He thinks that all there is to truth is what is given by those platitudes, plus some others: 'we should not look for more of a truth predicate than its compliance with a certain set of very general, very intuitive principles- indeed, a set of *platitudes*' (34). One way of understanding this approach is as a sort of functionalism: a view that truth is that property, whatever it may be, which plays the role—not, of course, a causal role—defined by the platitudes. And it may be thought that such a functionalism motivates a pluralism about truth.

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[1] I argue in Pettit 1991 that the recognition of response-dependence in my favoured sense involves a retraction of this claim, strictly understood, but not a retraction of a kind that ought seriously to threaten realists.

But that would be a mistake. The functionalist approach fits more readily with the monistic view of truth that I prefer. If we take a functionalist view of truth, admittedly, then we will be tempted to say that the 'satisfier of the platitudes' (35)—the realiser of the platitudes-satisfying role—in one area of discourse may differ from the satisfier in other areas and differ in a manner that connects with the interests of the realist. For example, it may be that the satisfier in one area is such that finding out the truth is relatively easy, while in another it is not. But while this is possible, and even likely, it does not mean that truth comes in many kinds under the scenario envisaged: it is consistent with a monism about truth.

Under the envisaged scenario, there remains only one sort of truth: that which is defined by the platitudes-satisfying role. It is just that what truth involves in one area—what realises the appropriate role—may be different from what it involves in another. The difference between what truth involves in the different areas will be explained by reference to the different subject-matters: the different truth-conditions, and the different truth-makers, in each discourse. Truth in physics is the same sort of truth as truth in matters of politesse but the difference between the subject-matters means that the one sort of truth is difficult to establish, the other relatively easy. What it is for something to be polite—what the truth-condition for a politeness claim is—means that it is relatively easy to tell whether something is polite. What it is for something to hold in physics—what the truth-condition is—may mean that ascertaining whether it obtains is a matter of great difficulty. The truth-condition in the latter case, to revert to the phrase we used earlier, is more free-standing that the truth-condition in the former.

Wright does not go along with this monistic line of thought. He does not think that for the realist the platitudes define what truth in any discourse is: that they establish the role of the truth-property. Rather he takes the view that by realist lights the property of truth relevant to any discourse is the property that best fits the common platitudes plus some principles characteristic of that particular discourse; he holds that by realist lights there are different roles, and therefore different truth-properties, associated with different areas. The common platitudes do not identify a property of truth that obtains, now in this area, now in that. Rather, the common platitudes represent a shared, partial determinant of the functions or roles that define different truth-properties.

But why does Wright go for this line? Why doesn't he opt for the more straightforward, monistic approach? The only reason I can detect is an assumption that the common platitudes are not sufficient on their own to identify a unique truth-property, at least not in every area.[2] The assumption is

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2   I assume, for the record, that since truth is to be understood in the functional way—here
     I follow Wright—and since the presumption must be against any error theory about

that there will sometimes be different candidate satisfiers of the common plat-
itudes and in each area we may need to bring in discourse-specific principles
to decide which satisfier is the property of truth-in-that-area. But this assump-
tion is never defended in its own right. So why does Wright endorse it? I
think that he may do so, because of his beliefs about a property he describes
as superassertibility.

A superassertible sentence is one that satisfies this condition: '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 im-
provement of our information'(48). Wright appears to assume that in every
discourse, there will be some sentences that are superassertible, others that are
not; he may find this persuasive to the extent that 'the superassertibility of a
statement carries no implication about the *strength* of the available evidence,
which though positive may be enduringly weak' (57). Wright believes that it
is at least plausible that in every discourse superassertibility represents a
satisfier of the platitudes for truth (56–57). But he admits that for realists, it
does not represent a suitable satisfier in every discourse (78–79). And so he is
forced to think of realists as saying that what identifies a suitable truth-prop-
erty for any discourse is the common platitudes plus something else: plus
some other discourse-specific principles.

It should be clear why, according to realists about a discourse, superassert-
ibility will not represent a suitable satisfier of the platitudes for truth: truth,
as they see it, will not have the epistemic connection, or the epistemic sta-
tus, of superassertibility. Wright imagines that most philosophers will agree
that truth comes to nothing more than superassertibility with a discourse like
that about the comic, since 'there seems to be no sense to be attached to the
idea that the comedy of a situation might elude the appreciation even of the
most fortunately situated judge' (58). But he admits that realists will baulk at
equating truth with superassertibility in discourses generally: say, in dis-
course about the past.

His beliefs about superassertibility may well be the reason why Wright
thinks that the common platitudes about truth are not sufficient on their own
to identify a unique truth-property: a unique role. Suppose, as he does, that
superassertibility is always available to interpret the platitudes. Suppose that
in some discourses superassertibility is not equivalent to truth, or at least not
by realist lights: truth is required in those discourses to satisfy the common
platitudes plus some extra constraints. It follows then, at least by realist
lights, that truth means different things in different discourses: sometimes it
involves the satisfaction of the basic platitudes plus these extra constraints;

truth, then it must be a matter of presumption that there are enough platitudes about to
identify a unique truth-property: a role that has only one satisfier in any given area,
though perhaps many different satisfiers in different areas.

sometimes the satisfaction of the basic platitudes plus those other extra constraints; sometimes, perhaps, just the satisfaction of the platitudes alone.

Are Wright's beliefs about superassertibility a good reason for going pluralist about truth or, at least, for thinking that realists are committed to a pluralism about truth? I don't think so. First, I am not convinced that superassertibility is a potential satisfier of all the platitudes for truth, though I shall say nothing further about that misgiving. Second, and this is the misgiving I shall air, I do not believe that superassertibility is defined for every discourse, so that some statements there are superassertible, others not. I shall argue this point while assuming an interpretation of superassertibility that seems natural but may not be compulsory. I shall assume in particular that a warrant survives only so long as it continues to have accessible force for the subject whom it serves. And I shall assume that when it is required that a warrant would survive certain tests, the tests envisaged range across a broad range of possibilities: they include more tests, for example, than those which the subject will actually confront himself; they include some that the subject might confront, even if he never will.

Consider the question as to whether a given coin is fair and assume that evidence about how it falls on being tossed is supposed to supply whatever warrant we may have for saying that it is fair. Does any possible warrant that we might have meet the condition required for superassertibility, that 'it would survive arbitrarily close scrutiny of its pedigree and arbitrarily extensive increments to or other forms of improvement of our information' (48)? I do not think so. Suppose the coin is fair and that some finite sequence of tosses—as long as you like—gives us reason for thinking so. Even in a world subject to the actual physical laws, it is always going to be possible for that sequence to be followed by a freak sequence—say, a long run of heads—that would undermine the warrant: that would deprive it of its warranting force. It will not do to stipulate that the following sequences must be improvements on our information about the coin, not freak runs; that would be to introduce a notion of truth distinct from superassertibility (cf. Blackburn 1993, p. 42). And so we are pressed to the conclusion that no possible warrant for the claim that the coin is fair is sufficient to make the claim superassertible.

The lesson of the example clearly extends to all claims that are based on inductive warrants; with any warrant for such a claim a freak run of observations would undermine it. Superassertibility does not seem to be satisfied, then, for the discourses associated with such claims. But what of intuitively less significant claims: say, the claim mentioned earlier that a certain joke is funny? Is superassertibility defined for discourse about the comic, so that we can be assured that such a statement is superassertible or not? I do not think so.

A plausible account of the funniness of remarks would say that a joke is funny just in case it is such as to make people laugh, provided those people satisfy certain standards of normality or whatever: they are not lunatics that would laugh at anything, for example, nor melancholics that would laugh at nothing. If we think that normality is something of which we can be absolutely sure that it is satisfied in a given instance, then we may be able to find a warrant for saying that a joke is funny such that it would survive any further information and the like: there is nothing that could conceivably deprive the warrant of its warranting force. But under what I take to be the best account of normality, this condition is not satisfied.

The account of normality that I have in mind would assume that to the extent that there is genuine discourse about the comic, people are going to baulk at any intertemporal or interpersonal discrepancy in their judgments as to whether a joke is funny and are going to look for reasons to discount one of those judgments. The account would define normal conditions for the discourse, then, as those conditions that are apt to survive such discounting (Pettit 1993, Chapter 2). But under this approach, no one can ever guarantee that normality is satisfied: later discrepancies may lead him to indict any present circumstances as having been faulty and misleading in some way. And so under this approach no warrant for the claim that a joke is funny is such that it would survive any arbitrarily close scrutiny or any arbitrarily extensive information.

This brief discussion of superassertibility is unsatisfactory, if only because I have skated over different possible ways of understanding the notion and because I haven't been able to consider all that Wright might say in response. But I hope it is sufficient to give at least some plausibility to the idea that superassertibility may be a property uninstantiated by at least our more significant discourses. If it does this, then it will raise a question about whether Wright has any serious reason for thinking that the platitudes about truth are generally insufficient to identify a unique property. That is a good question to raise, because it opens up the possibility that we can go the platitudes-way that Wright identifies, without being drawn into a pluralism about truth. We can be both functionalists and monists about truth and still find room for locating the various claims that realists are wont to make.[3]

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