Book Review

The Metaphysics of Truth **by Douglas Edwards Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. x + 210. ISBN 9780198758693. £45.00 ($56.00) (hardcover).**

By Ragnar van der Merwe, University of Johannesburg

Douglas Edwards has become one of the leading voices in the current debate about whether truth has a nature, and if so, what it may be. He builds on the work of Wright (1992) and Lynch (2009) to present his own distinctive, systematic account of alethic pluralism: *determination pluralism*. This carefully developed position is articulated in Edwards' recent book *The Metaphysics of Truth* (2018). The engaging monograph lays out a step–by–step argument, firstly, *against* minimalist positions about truth, and, secondly, *for* determination pluralism. Edwards further claims that his truth pluralism entails ontological pluralism, and, thereby, global metaphysical pluralism. As we will see, the book is brimming with superb arguments, but, perhaps, underdeveloped with regards to precision in a few key areas. In the first part of this review I will survey the book, summarizing the most salient themes therein. Secondly, I will extend a few of these themes, articulating some concerns and objections. Lastly, I will conclude by weighing up what has preceded.

In chapters 1, 3, 9 and 10 Edwards makes an extensive case against minimalists – primarily deflationists – and thereby a case for a notion of truth as a substantial property. Edwards argues convincingly against ultra–deflationists that 'is true' is a predicate. All parties concerned agree that a predicate picks out a property. Therefore, truth is a property. Having

established that truth is a property, Edwards explains in chapter 2 why this property is also substantive. Most contemporary deflationists typically recognize that truth is a property, but hold that it is insubstantive. In response, Edwards argues that truth must be substantive or inflationary due to its robust *explanatory power*. Truth also has *normative* force: we value truth, truth is a worthy pursuit. Plus, truth plays a crucial role as the condition of *meaning* in many semantic theories. These attributes can only be accounted for by an inflationary, metaphysical theory of truth. Truth, *qua* property, has 'metaphysical weight. . . truths form a genuine kind' (Edwards 2018, 36). Deflationism, moreover, hides implicit commitments to a notion of truth as a substantive property. We cannot make sense of, or use, the predicate 'is true' without a prior understanding of truth. Therefore, a metaphysically substantial account of truth must, in fact, precede alethic deflationism.

Chapter 4 involves an investigation of the relationship between predicates and properties (see also Edwards' first book [2014] for an extended discussion on properties). Edwards develops two models of the relationship between predicates and properties: the *responsive* and the *generative* model. The former involves language responding to the world; the latter involves language generating the world. We articulate responsive predicates by *reacting* to objective properties 'out there'; these are *sparse* properties (Lewis 1983). For example, it is because a rod 'has the property of being metallic that [the] rod falls under the predicate 'is metallic'' (Edwards 2018, 68). This is 'a property–to–predicate direction of explanation. . . it is *because* A has the property of being F that A falls under the predicate 'is F'' (68 original emphasis).

Generative predicates, on the other hand, *project* their content onto the world, bringing properties into existence; these are *abundant* properties (Lewis 1983). For example, 'motorbikes have the property of being cool because motorbikes fall under the predicate of 'is cool', rather than vice versa' (Edwards 2018, 68). This is 'a predicate–to–property direction of explanation. . . it is *because* A falls under the predicate 'is F' that A is F' (68). True

sentences containing responsive predicates are true by virtue of *correspondence*; true sentences containing generative predicates are (generally) true by virtue of *superassertibility* (See Wright [1992, 48] or Edwards [2018, 83] for a definition).

Each predicate should be examined on a case–by–case basis to establish which of the two models it fits. Edwards discusses a few cases, deciding that physical predicates ('is wet') and chemical predicates ('is acidic') are responsive, while institutional predicates ('is the governor') and social predicates ('is black' or 'is a woman', for example) are generative. 'Is black' and 'is a woman' are not biological predicates, because part of

> the functional role of biological predicates is to. . . discern different kinds in nature. . .
> without imposing any sort of privilege or subjugation of different kinds of organisms.
> Social predicates, on the other hand, are. . . concerned with describing and explaining
> power relations between different groups of people. (Edwards 2018, 64)

Furthermore, if this distinction is applicable to predicates, then it follows that the same is the case for singular terms that form atomic sentences with predicates. The order of explanation between a singular term and the object to which it refers can go either in the direction of object–to–term (responsive/sparse model) or in the opposite direction from term–to–object (generative/abundant model). In the former case metaphysical states are prior to alethic states; they are *mind independent*. In the latter case alethic states are prior to metaphysical states; they are *mind dependent*.

In chapters 5, 7 and 8 Edwards begins his positive argument for determination pluralism. The scope problem (See Lynch [2009, 32–36] or Edwards [2018, 92–94] for detail) entails that different theories of truth apply in different domains of discourse. For the determination pluralist this translates nicely into the model described above. We cannot get the sparse versus abundant model 'up and running without a pluralist approach to truth' (Edwards 2018,

83). This 'distinction entails there being at least two different approaches to truth' (83): a *representational* reading involving truth by correspondence and a *non–representational* reading involving truth by superassertibility. Therefore, truth pluralism follows. When considered this way, though, Edwards' view is more properly construed as alethic *dualism* than pluralism.

The truth property is exhaustively described by a list of platitudes similar to those of Wright (1992, 34–35) and Lynch (2009, 8–12) (Edwards 2018, 125). Now the question is whether truth (being true) itself is an abundant or a sparse property. Edwards answers that truth is a special kind of property 'that has claims to both unity and plurality' (2018, 124). The truth property is a domain–free property, neither sparse nor abundant, since it is itself 'a key instrument used to make the distinction between sparseness and abundance' (140). In each domain of discourse there is a functional, domain–relative property (correspondence or superassertibility) that determines the domain–free, universal truth property. Truth is an extrinsic property shared by true sentences from all domains. However,

> possession of the truth property is ultimately dependent on things other than the sentence [itself]. Being true is a property that a sentence has in virtue of possessing some other property. (Edwards 2018, 171)

Truth is multiply realized, or, rather, multiply *determined*.

In chapter 6 Edwards argues that alethic concerns cannot be separated from ontological ones. Truth pluralism motivates *ontological pluralism*. The scope problem applies to *being* as well as to truth. Being is also conventionally defined relative to domains (albeit in terms of quantifiers instead of predicates). Perhaps, being is that which has *causal powers* in the physical domain, while being is that which is *constructed* in social, institutional, mathematical and moral domains. Sometimes truth responds to being; sometimes truth

generates being. Moreover, continues Edwards, being has the same characteristics as truth, in that it is also a special, general property that is neither sparse nor abundant. This synchrony between truth and being – *mutatis mutandis* – implies *global metaphysical pluralism* about the relationship between language and world.

Having summarized the argument for determination pluralism – or dualism – made in the book, I will now discuss three concerns I have with the view. The first concern involves Edwards' seemingly oversimplified lumping together of what are usually taken to be different metaphysical notions. I use the two examples of truth bearers and domains of subject matter. The second concern is that determination *dualism* has not met the burden of proof any dualistic metaphysical theory carries, *viz.* clear articulation of its two realms or kinds. The third concern is that the implications of the second concern may invoke a slippery slope to social constructivism about *all* human properties. Perhaps all predicates denoting a human property function, to some degree, in a way that determines social construction given the criteria Edwards stipulates.

Regarding the first concern, some may protest that Edwards grossly oversimplifies the world in order to construct his overarching model. At various times he lumps together ostensibly different metaphysical notions in a somewhat idiosyncratic manner. For example, without argument, he takes beliefs, thoughts, ideas and sentences to all be candidate truth–bearers, even if he prefers sentences (and is suspicious of propositions) (2018, 20–21, 89–90). Some will question whether a theory of truth should consider mental entities, like thoughts, to be synonymous with linguistic entities, like sentences. If *sentences* are truth–bearers, then (apparently) only humans have alethic capabilities and the capacity to generate objects and properties. If, on the other hand, *thoughts* are truth–bearers, then most animals are alethic agents who can generate objects and properties. Since animals surely perceive the world

differently to us, it is plausible that they construct different ontologies to us. Are we to be pluralists in this regard as well?

Edwards also lumps together moral, mathematical, institutional and social domains of subject matter as all being of the abundant, non–representational or mind–dependent kind. It is not clear that this mixed–bag can easily be grouped together as constituting objects and properties that we generate by formulating true sentences. While moral and mathematical ontologies appear to be entirely mind–dependent, it is contentious whether institutional and social ontologies are. Edwards takes time to engage with the work of Thomasson (2015), in particular, on institutional and social ontology. Yet, he seems unable – without hedging or promissory notes – to account for difficult cases that, *prima facie*, appear to contain aspects of both mind–dependence and mind–independence. Examples of these 'complex' cases are an economic system having the property of being in a recession (Edwards 2018, 75 fn. 21) and a person having the property of being courageous (79–81). More metaphysical work is needed in order to premise a convincing argument that institutional and social reality is entirely generated by true sentences.

My second concern relates to Edwards' predicate kind individuation. He mentions many predicate kinds (physical, chemical, biological, social, institutional, mathematical, moral etc.). However, these kinds are further grouped into two overarching kinds: responsive and generative predicate kinds. Physical and chemical predicates clearly lie on the responsive side of the demarcation, while mathematical and moral predicates clearly lie on the generative side. Things get somewhat murky, though, at the biological and social levels. As one reads Edwards' instruction on the social construction of race and gender properties (2018, 63–66, 72–75), one cries out for examples at the interface of the biological and the social domains. If race and gender properties are socially constructed because they 'carry implications of

privilege or oppression' (64), then which human–related properties are not socially constructed?

One wonders whether 'is gay' or 'is disabled' are responsive (biological) or generative (social) predicates. It is not plain to see how these cases are supposed come out if run through Edwards' model, and he is unfortunately silent on these sorts of risky, tricky cases. He cannot claim that there are both responsive *and* generative elements here, since this would collapse his predicate kind distinction, and therefore, his dualism/pluralism. The property of being a genius is briefly mentioned, but only in the context of discussing the views of other thinkers (Edwards 2018, 103). Edwards does not venture a classification of the predicate 'is a genius' according to his own responsive versus generative criteria. Instead, he sticks to uncontroversial examples: using chemical predicates as examples of responsive kinds and race and gender predicates as examples of generative kinds. Dualists carry the burden of defending their necessary distinction against attacks from monists. Edwards' distinction between the two overarching predicate kinds will need clear articulation and defence; exact examples at the boundary would be helpful.

Lastly, some rather counter–intuitive consequences seem to follow from Edwards' Foucauldian distinction between biological and social predicates as a function of oppressive power relations. For example, all the predicates I listed above could, or have, played a role in some sort of privilege or subjugation. 'Is gay', 'is disabled' and 'is a genius' all carry some degree of implicit historical and/or cultural association with social power relations. In fact, it is hard to think of any predicate denoting a human property that is completely sterile of the conceptual taint that Edwards considers determinate of social construction. It appears that, for the determination pluralist, there might be no human biological kinds. Humans cannot be grouped in any way that is not, to some degree, a function of power relations, *viz.* privilege

and subjugation. Edwards seems to be on a slippery–slope to the radical conclusion that we, *qua* humans, are entirely socially constructed.

To conclude, despite the above criticisms, there is much to value in Edwards' lucid book. Alethic monists often have to adopt rather ugly, convoluted metaphysics in order to avoid the implications of the scope problem. To their credit, alethic pluralists do not suffer this burden. Furthermore, Edwards' attack on minimalist theories of truth carries much weight. It should be challenging for deflationists in particular to finish the book without profound philosophical self–doubt. Also, Edwards' claim that the truth property itself is *transcendent* of both standard property categories, as well as conventional domain membership, is convincing. There is something special about truth, in the sense that it appears to be both irreducible and yet somehow substantive.

One further topic, which Edwards does not mention in the context of responsive and generative predicates, but that may provide for fruitful research, is the notion of *self–reference*. How do I use a predicate to denote properties of myself (in particular my mental states), and are these self–referential predicates responsive or generative? Regardless, Edwards' parsimonious, yet thoughtful, book is arguably the most thoroughly worked out theory of alethic pluralism to date and deserves serious consideration. Determination pluralism refines the theories of Wright and Lynch without adding excessive, speculative metaphysical layers. The book contains – not only deep insights into the debate – but also some enticing loose–ends for future development. I highly recommend Edwards book to anyone who cares (and who doesn't?) about *truth*.

References

Edwards, D. 2014. *Properties*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Edwards, D. 2018. *The Metaphysics of Truth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lewis, D. 1983. "New Work for a Theory of Universals." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 61: 343–377.

Lynch, M. 2009. *Truth as One and Many*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Thomasson, A. 2015. *Ontology Made Easy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wright, C. 1992. *Truth and Objectivity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.