

The Minimalist Approach of Truth and its Virtues*

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Abstract: The investigation from this paper has several purposes. First, I will try to highlight the specific of minimalist approach of truth as opposed to the specific of classical or metaphysical approach of truth. Secondly, I will try to present synthetic the main minimalist theories of truth. Thirdly, I will systematize the main virtues of minimalist theories of truth. I will argue that the main virtues of this approach are: understanding the truth as transparent property, removing unwanted metaphysical implications and eliminating unnecessary theorizing. Finally, I will indicate some difficulties of the minimalist approach of truth.

Keywords: deflationism, echivalence schema, disquotational schema, metaphysical theories of truth, minimalist theories of truth, pleonastic property, transparent property.

1. Characteristic features of the minimalist approach to truth.

According to traditional (metaphysical) theories of truth, it is justified to use the predicate „true” if there is a property A such that any proposition considered to be true has property A. This property was thought to be, in turn, „correspondence to reality”, „coherence with a set of sentences”, „verifiability”, „utility” or a specific property determined by the particular field to which the sentences belong (geometry, history,

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biology etc.). Supporters of the minimalist or deflationary¹ approach to truth argue that such „inflationary” assumptions about truth’s implying an additional property are neither necessary nor theoretically justifiable. Their position is based on an epistemic reason: to see whether truth implies an additional property (e.g. correspondence) means, in Simon Blackburn’s words, „stepping outside your own skin - on the one hand making a judgment and on the other hand obtaining a God’s-eye or ‘sideways’ view of both the judgment and the facts and measuring how well they match”². The solution: eliminating the inflation, eliminating the property which is deemed superfluous and, at an extreme point, even eliminating the predicate „true”. However, this is not to say that deflationists deny the existence of true sentences. What they reject is the idea that all the true sentences might have one property in common. In other words, minimalist philosophers share an anti-metaphysical position: true sentences or propositions have no common property, no essence in virtue of which they could all be labeled „true”.

Minimalist theories consider truth to be a logical predicate we can do without. The characteristic approach of the standard deflationism is clearly outlined by A.J. Ayer. From his point of view, any assertion can

¹ Not all philosophers agree that minimalism and deflationism represent one and the same perspective on truth. For example, Crispin Wright points out that the two deflationist schemas (ES) and (DS) are not sufficient to convey everything which can be stated about truth. Apart from this, Wright rejects the anti-metaphysical message of deflationism. While recognizing truth to be a substantial property, Wright suggests that his own form of minimalism is closer to a pluralist metaphysics. In other words, although truth is a substantial property, it does not have a unique nature: “Minimalism only requires that each discourse that deals in truth-apt claims is associated with such a property whose character need not be fully determinable just from the list of basic principles serving to characterize the concept but which, relative to the discourse in question, serves as truth by dint of satisfying those principles. The fuller characterization of this property will depend on specific features of the particular discourse, and it will ultimately depend on these features whether or not the relevant truth property can be explicitly identified by, for instance, a biconditional of the type above. Minimalism thus incorporates a potential pluralism about truth, in the specific sense that what property serves as truth may vary from discourse to discourse.” (Crispin Wright, “Minimalism, Deflationism, Pragmatism, Pluralism”, in Michael P. Lynch (ed.), *The Nature of Truth. Classic and Contemporary Perspectives*, p. 752). In what follows, this type of minimalism is referred to as „quietism”, while minimalism and deflationism are seen largely as synonyms.

² Simon Blackburn, *Truth. A Guide for Perplexed*, Penguin Books, London, 2005, p. 56

begin with „it is true that” and yet not bring any new information by doing so. If we say that „ it is true that London is the capital of England”, we say no more than „London is the capital of England”. Similarly, the assertion „It is false that cows are carnivorous” is equivalent to the assertion „Cows are not carnivorous”. In other words, „it is true that p ” is only a longer version of „that p ” and „it is false that p ” is a version of the assertion „that non- p ”³. In addition to this, Ayer believes there are no such predicates as truth or falsity.

An important criterion to differentiate among minimalist theories derives from the position towards truth-bearers: for some minimalists, truth-bearers are sentences, for others, truth-bearers are propositions. In Quine’s terms, the difference between the two categories of truth-bearers is substantial: sentences are contextualized and therefore can be subject to vacillations (they can be formulated in different languages, under different circumstances, by different speakers etc), while propositions are „logical essences” of sentences, meanings of sentences. „Propositions, thought of as sentence meanings, were the meanings exclusively of sentences of a firmer sort, not subject to such vacillations; what we may call eternal sentences.”⁴. On the basis of this distinction, philosophers supporting the redundancy-theory of truth as well as those advocating the disquotational theory of truth take *propositions* to be truth-bearers. In contrast, philosophers advocating the performative theory of truth and those adhering to the prosentential theory of truth take *sentences* to be bearers of truth.

Minimalist philosophers accept what Tarski called Convention T: „snow is white” if and only if snow is white. So, for minimalists, everything which can be stated about truth can be captured in one of the following schemas:

(ES) p is true if and only if p ;

³ A. J. Ayer, “Truth”, in vol. *The Concept of a Person and Other Essays*, Macmillan, London, 1963, p. 164.

⁴ W. V. O. Quine “Truth”, in Michael P. Lynch (ed.), *The Nature of Truth. Classic and Contemporary Perspectives*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, 2001, p. 474.

(DS) „ p ” is true if and only if p ;

These two schemas are thought to contain all correct uses of the predicate „true”⁵. The equivalence schema (ES) was considered to be essential by philosophers for whom truth-bearers were propositions, while the disquotational schema (DS) was deemed essential by those who considered truth-bearers to be sentences.

2. Main minimalist theories. The most important minimalist theories of truth, which can also be seen as stages leading up to the standard theory proposed by Horwich, are the following: the redundancy theory of truth, the performative theory of truth, the prosentential theory of truth and the disquotational theory of truth. Due to their belonging to the same category and their similar basic assumptions, these theories are often only vaguely distinguished from one another.

The redundancy theory of truth. Gottlob Frege outlined at the end of the nineteenth century what today is called by epistemologists the redundancy theory of truth. To be precise, it is not a theory of truth in its own right, rather it is an attempt to demonstrate that the predicate „true” in speech is useless. According to Frege, the following two sentences:

(1) *Frederik The Great won at Rossbach* and

(2) *It is true that Frederik the Great won at Rossbach*

express one and the same thought, the difference between them being only a linguistic one⁶. By asserting (1), we implicitly express (2). The assertion of (1) implies the stating of its truth. Therefore, from an epistemic point of view, (1) is equivalent to (2). The conclusion which follows is quite simple: the usage of the predicate „true” in speech is, most of the times, redundant.

F.P. Ramsey⁷ arrives at a similar conclusion. He takes the following propositions as the target of analysis:

⁵ Crispin Wright, *Op.cit.*, p. 751.

⁶ Gottlob Frege, “Logik”, in *Nachgelassene Schriften*, Hamburg, 1969, pp. 140, 153.

⁷ Hartry Field gives a different interpretation of Ramsey’s approach to truth. He believes that Ramsey defends a version of the „correspondence-theory of truth”, since he was devoted to finding a naturalist explanation of the way mental symbols stand for objects in the world. (Hartry Field, “Correspondence Truth, Disquotational Truth, and Deflationism”,

(3)*The Earth is round.*

(4)*It is true that the Earth is round.*

(5)*Anybody who believes that the Earth is round holds a true belief.*

Ramsey argues that the equivalence between these three sentences is obvious. In other words, it is impossible to claim that one of them is false while stating that the others are true without reaching a plain contradiction. For example, to say „It is true that the Earth is round” but that „The Earth is not round” is undoubtedly an absurdity⁸. Ramsey shows that in a conversation about the form of the Earth, the sentences (3), (4) or (5) can be used interchangeably, since they are alternative expressions of one and the same proposition. Still, even if we are aware of their being identical to one another, in everyday speech we cannot give up using the predicates „true” and „false”; there are situations in which the use of these predicates is justified by stylistic reasons.

The performative theory of truth. Philosophers who support this view of truth plead for the elimination of the predicate „true” not because of its redundancy, but because the intentions with which speakers utter, for example, sentences (4) and (5) are similar. „X is Y” and „The judgment «X is Y» is true” have exactly one and the same meaning and express, logically speaking, the same proposition. The belief that the mere presence of the predicate „true” ascribes any special property to a judgment is nothing but a syntactical illusion. We assert „X is Y” with exactly the same intentions with which we assert „the judgment «X is Y» is true”. In addition, in most cases, we can replace „it is true that” with a set of other expressions which can fulfill exactly the same role: „I confirm that”, „I admit that”, „I agree that” etc. But things would work out in the same way if there was nothing instead of these expressions. In those situations in which the intention of the speaker who utters „X is Y” is in no way different from his intention when he

in Michael P. Lynch (ed.), *The Nature of Truth. Classic and Contemporary Perspectives*, p. 490).

⁸ F. P. Ramsey, “The Nature of Truth”, in Paul Horwich (ed.), *Theories of Truth*, Dartmouth, Aldershot, Brookfield USA, Singapore, Sydney, 1994, p. 73.

utters „the judgment «X is Y» is true”, the use of the predicate „true” turns out to be useless.

This idea was developed by P.F.Strawson in a 1949 article, *Truth*, and in an answer given to J.L.Austin (1950). Strawson criticizes both Tarski’s approach to truth and Austin’s by showing that when we state a sentence with the form „X is Y”, we rarely intend to say „X corresponds to Y”. Instead, most of the times, we utter it with specific purposes: we can use it to recapitulate what has been learnt during a lesson, to remind ourselves of something or even to emphasize a strong belief. Moreover, we can even use a sentence of the form „X is Y” without intending to say that X is Y in some way. We might use it to support somebody, to warn him, to remind him of something, to deny, to confirm, to guarantee, to admit what somebody said. In all these cases, according to Strawson, we assert that X is Y⁹. The predicate „true” can also be used with several functions, some of which are: an abbreviative function - for example, when somebody says „X is Y” we may disagree and deny that „X is Y” by saying „no, it is not” or „no, it is not true”; alternatively, we can confirm that „X is Y” by answering „yes, it is”; a concessive function - for example, during a debate, we may realize we were wrong and admit „yes, it is true that p...”; finally, it can also be used to emphasize the importance of a sentence to a speaker.

The prosentential theory of truth. Another kind of deflationary theory of truth is the prosentential theory, elaborated by Grover, Camp and Belnap¹⁰ and revised by Grover two decades later¹¹. The basic assumption of this approach is that „to be true” does not function neither semantically, nor as a logical predicate; its uses are „prosentential”. But what should we understand by „prosentential” uses of an expression? To answer this question, we must introduce the term „anaphora”. In this context, „anaphora” means the use of a word or phrase referring to an

⁹ P. F. Strawson, “Truth”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplement 24, 1950, p. 146.

¹⁰ Dorothy L. Grover, Joseph L. Camp, Jr., Nuel D. Belnap, Jr., “A Prosentential Theory of Truth”, *Philosophical Studies*, 27, 1975, pp. 73-125.

¹¹ Dorothy L. Grover, *A Prosentential Theory of Truth*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1992.

aforementioned word or phrase in a text to avoid repetition. Grover, Camp and Belnap argue that the predicate „is true” is a prosentential expression - an expression used to refer to an aforementioned sentence, an anaphora. But the mere use of „is true” to refer to an aforementioned sentence does not imply our ascribing the property „true” to that sentence¹². One example provided by the authors is the following:

(6) *Snow is white. This is true, but it rarely seems to be white in Pittsburgh.*

Grover, Camp and Belnap argue that when an English speaker states „this is true” as in the example above, „this” is not an independent demonstrative pronoun, but refers to the sentence stating that snow is white. „Is true” is not a property expressed by means of a truth-ascribing predicate, it is rather an anaphoric expression of the sentence „Snow is white”. Of course, this uttering of „This is true” cannot be literally replaced with „Snow is white”. „This is true” requires an antecedent, just like any anaphora. Its use confirms the existence of an antecedent¹³.

The disquotational theory of truth. A version of the deflationary theory of truth is based on an ingenious interpretation of the (DS) schema, an interpretation which is described as „simple and natural” by its proponents. This theory was called the disquotational theory of truth and its main supporter was W.V.O. Quine. The American philosopher thought that „Instead of saying that ‘Snow is white’ is true if and only if it is a fact that snow is white we can simply delete ‘it is a fact that’ as vacuous, and therewith facts themselves: ‘Snow is white’ is true if and only if snow is white. To ascribe truth to the sentence is to ascribe whiteness to snow; such is the correspondence, in this example. Ascription of truth just cancels the quotation marks.”¹⁴ Quine is certain that the ascription of the predicate „true” to a sentence is superfluous; a sentence can only be uttered. What we can say is that only a „thought sentence” or an „eternal sentence” can be true or false.

¹² Stephen Read, *Thinking About Logic*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 29.

¹³ Dorothy L. Grover, Joseph L. Camp, Jr., Nuel D. Belnap, Jr., “A Prosentential Theory of Truth”, p. 94.

¹⁴ W. V. O. Quine , “Truth”, în Michael P. Lynch (ed.), *The Nature of Truth. Classic and Contemporary Perspectives*, p. 475

Why does Quine believe that only „eternal sentences” can be true? To answer this question let us examine the following kind of situation. The proposition „«I am hungry» is true” is disquotationally equivalent to „I am hungry”. This means that we cannot use the disquotational approach to describe the truth conditions for the sentence „I am hungry” when it is uttered by another person, even though we have a perfect understanding of what this person tells us. If I tried to describe these conditions, I would end up arguing that the sentence „I’m hungry” is true when I am hungry. Quine attempts to eliminate this problem by delineating a class of „eternal sentences” which can function as truth-bearers. The „eternal sentences” are those sentences whose different instantiations will have the same truth-value. No sentence which contains indexical expressions can qualify as an „eternal sentence”. For this reason, „I’m hungry” is not an eternal sentence; therefore, the use of the predicate „true” regarding this sentence is superfluous. The disquotational possibility is not a queer feature of truth, which should be elucidated by way of a „theory of truth”. Truth does not explain anything, it does not convey an occult or essential property of things; we can say of a sentence that it is true if and only if it is assertable. The act of asserting proposition p is implicitly a way to say „ p is true”.

3. Virtues of the minimalist approach to truth. A. For early minimalists (Frege, Ramsey), truth was only a logical instrument, with no metaphysical burden attached to it. This is the main virtue of the minimalist approach, especially if we think of the major difficulties classical theories face when trying to account for their metaphysical burden. The foundation of this theory - our inclination to infer in an *a priori* fashion the proposition „Snow is white” from the proposition „it is true that snow is white” and the other way around¹⁵ - protects minimalists from unjustified metaphysical commitments.

B. If we are naturally inclined to accept without doubt the basic schema of this theory - p is true if and only if p - as Horwich shows, then

¹⁵ Michael Lynch, *Truth as One and Many*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009, p. 106

we acquire a valuable generalization tool. This schema encompasses an infinity of cases, by indicating the conditions in which we can assert that a sentence is true. Basically, wherever the property „true” might be, it is revealed to us by understanding the concept of truth.

C. Initially, the (ES) schema was interpreted as stating the identity of the two propositions. This was the view held by the advocates of the redundancy theory of truth, for example. The predicate „true” was denied any value, any power to express a property. Yet, many of the minimalists of today agree that truth expresses a property in the same sense in which concepts such as *identity* or *existence* express a property or a relation, but this property is *metaphysically transparent*, it is a *pleonastic property*. Metaphysically transparent properties do not have some deep nature beyond what can be revealed by the mere understanding of the concept which denotes them. If one understands the concept, one understands all there is to this property, all its essence. For example, one property of this kind is „to be in conjunction”. We understand the nature of this relationship when we understand that for it to be true, both conjuncts have to be true. This is how some minimalists understand „truth”¹⁶. In this view, understanding the concept of „truth” is ensured by understanding the instantiations of the T schema, without any additional metaphysical effort.

D. From a minimalist perspective, truth does not have an explanatory function. It only has an expressive function. The truth does not explain anything, it does not play any significant role in any explanation, except for his role as a tool for generalizing or for expressing a speaker’s attitude towards a sentence. Obviously, true propositions are part of the explanations (otherwise we would be unable to explain anything), but minimalists believe that „the fact that a proposition has the property of truth can’t be an essential, primitive part of an explanation for some other phenomena.”¹⁷ At this point, the minimalist approach is close to the view defended by the pragmatist tradition following James-Rorty.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 107.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 108.

E. If truth is ensured by the instantiations of the T schema, then to understand truth we do not need a philosophical theory of truth, a theoretical second order approach to it. This is one of the most important consequences of minimalism, especially in its quietist version: the general is replaced with the particular. The quietist refuses to answer the question „What is truth?” because this answer would inevitably be too general and therefore lacking in substance. Basically, any proposition with the form $p \rightarrow p$ is true. The quietist would follow this route: „there is a fact of the matter that p ” \rightarrow „it is really true that p ” \rightarrow „it is true that p ” \rightarrow „ p ”. Simon Blackburn notes that for the minimalist, „to make an assertion at all is to put a view into public space, up for acceptance or rejection. That public space will be replete with more-or-less articulate norms determining which things count for acceptance or rejection.”¹⁸ Every area of inquiry inside which one makes an assertion stands on its own, and therefore decides which assertions are accepted and which are rejected, according to its internal normative framework. In Blackburn’s words, the characteristic attitude is „do not take us to philosophical commentary *on* the area, but only show us affirming confidence *within* the area (...) We are not at any point philosophizing *about* an area, but must always reason *within* it.”¹⁹ Accepting or rejecting a mathematical assertion can only occur within mathematics, without any second-order commentary on truth. Accepting or rejecting an assertion regarding living creatures can only occur within biology, not by way of second-order reflections on truth. And so on. Instead of an empty reflection on truth, the quietist will prefer silence.

4. The difficulties of the minimalist approach to truth. As has been outlined from the beginning of this paper, deflationists start from the premise that truth is not a property, at least not an authentic property. Everything there is to say about truth can be captured in the (ES) and (DS) schemas. Truth is understood as being, in turn, a metaphysically transparent property, a disquotational mechanism, a logical tool for

¹⁸ Simon Blackburn, *Op.cit.*, p. 68.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 122-123.

generalization, or a way by which a speaker expresses his attitude towards a sentence. Despite the advantages its proponents saw in it, deflationism had to face a set of critiques and objections. This came equally from the traditional, metaphysical approaches and from the inside of the deflationist movement, as we shall see in what follows.

Pascal Engel, for example, taking a rather traditional stand, brings two set of objections against deflationism²⁰. First of all, he thinks that the deflationist approach to truth cannot capture the common sense intuitions such as the idea that scientific investigations converge towards truth or that true sentences have a correspondence relationship with the things they refer to. Following Dummett, Engel says that forgetting the fact that our investigations, assertions and beliefs are directed towards truth is just like forgetting that the purpose of taking part in a game is to win²¹. Secondly, a theory on truth conditions is a metaphilosophical requirement we cannot do without: minimalism in what regards truth robs other epistemological debates of their meaning and purpose²². In the absence of a robust theory on the nature and the conditions of truth, all philosophical debates regarding the possibility of knowledge, of grounding and justifying it lack any foundational structure.

Other counterarguments to minimalism were set forth by analytic philosophers, some of whom were deflationists. Paul Horwich summarizes three of these counterarguments. First, both in (ES) and in (DS) schemas, the theory can accept an infinity of axioms and therefore will never be brought to a complete form. Therefore, the deflationist theory of truth can only be described, in the sense that one can only state with precision that this theory has either (ES) form axioms, or (DS) form axioms, without ever being able to list all of them in an exhaustive way. Horwich notes that „this alleged defect has led some philosophers to develop theories which show, first, how the truth of any proposition derives from the referential properties of its constituents; and, second, how the referential properties of primitive constituents are

²⁰ Pascal Engel, *Truth*, Acumen Press, Chesham, 2002.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 58.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 119.

determined”²³. Yet, Horwich believes that these attempts are doomed to failure since they depend on an adequate theory of reference; but such theory is not there yet.

Secondly, certain instantiations of (ES) are most clearly false. Take the following example:

(a) *This sentence is false.*

If we try to fit (a) into an (ES) form, what comes out is this:

(b) *This sentence is false if and only if this sentence is false.*

Horwich explains that “given (b), the supposition that (a) is true implies that (a) is not true, and the supposition that it is not true implies that it is. Consequently, not every instance of the equivalence schema can be included in the theory of truth.”²⁴ What we reach in such cases is plain contradiction.

As a third point, the disquotational theories which start from (DS) cannot account for the truth of sentences which contain indexicals, adjectives and demonstrative pronouns, i.e. terms whose reference is variable. We analyzed earlier this objection and followed the manner in which Quine attempted to overcome it.

If we are to place the critique of minimalism in an epistemological paradigm, the most important objections against minimalism are the following two. The first one is that this type of theories does not explain the relationship between truth and knowledge. If one accepts that the philosophical problems raised by this issue can be reduced to the problems of expressively using the predicate „true”, and these in their turn are explained only as tools for generalization, reference to aforementioned sentences or expression of a speaker’s attitude towards a sentence, then we are left out of good reasons to argue that an opinion has to be true in order to qualify as knowledge. This leads up to breaking the intrinsic relationship most philosophers (except for the advocates of process reliabilism) see between truth and knowledge, a relationship asserted not only by the classical analysis of knowledge, but also by the analyses

²³ Paul Horwich, „Theories of Truth”, in *A Companion to Epistemology*, Jonathan Dancy, Ernest Sosa, Matthias Steup (eds.), Wiley-Blackwell, Malden, Oxford, 2010, p. 775.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 775.

which followed the Gettier counterexamples. In this same epistemological line, the minimalist approach can be accused of making it hard to discern between truth and warrant. According to the (ES) schema, the reason brought in favour of p is implicitly reason brought in favor of the truth of p . But this means that by providing justifications for proposition p , we argue for the truth of p . This problem may be irrelevant from a logical point of view, but for those who are devoted to a rigorous analysis of the concept „knowledge”, this consequence is very difficult to accept. Yet, since all we can do to support a proposition is to provide warrants for it, perhaps we can agree with Richard Rorty who, in a conversation with Pascal Engel, stated the following: we do not have any way to establish the truth of a belief or **the Tightness** of an action except by reference to the justifications we offer for thinking what we think or doing what we do. The philosophical distinction between justification and truth seems not to have practical consequences.”²⁵ The same goes for the minimalist philosophers. For them, this distinction has no value as long as the truth has a purely expressive function.

²⁵ Richard Rorty & Pascal Engel, *What's the Use of Truth?*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2007, pp. 44-45.