

MINIMALIST TRUTH  
A Review Article on  
Paul Horwich, Truth. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990  
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Tradition has it that truth is a substantive and deeply significant property. It is thought to consist, for example, in some correspondence in nature between a belief or statement and the world, a correspondence that is explanatory in our theories of mind and language. In recent times, a few philosophers have rejected this tradition and urged deflationary theories of truth. Paul Horwich is one such philosopher. His book, Truth, is a thorough presentation and defence of the deflationary idea and of the arguments for it, perhaps the most thorough available. The book is clear, mostly persuasive, and generally admirable.

The deflationists' challenge to substantive truth is obviously of interest. But deflationary theories have a further interest, even for a substantivist. To see this we need to distinguish three parts of any deflationary theory: (a) its account of the "logical" or "expressive" role of truth; (b) its account of the nature of truth that enables it to play that role; (c) its claim that there is no more to truth's role or nature than is captured by these accounts.

The direct challenge to substantive theories comes from (c). The substantivist must reject the view that the accounts in (a) and (b) exhaust the role and nature of truth. However, she need not reject those accounts. Even if there is more to truth than deflationists allow, they have made it immensely plausible that, at least, truth does have a logical role which requires only a minimal nature. This is an important discovery about truth that should be accommodated by any theory. And this discovery makes the challenge to substantive theories rather formidable. Given that so much of truth's role and nature seems to be captured by the deflationists, why suppose there is anything more substantive to truth?

Consider what Horwich has to say about each of these.

(a) What is the role of truth? What is it for?

The truth predicate exists solely for the sake of a certain logical need. On occasion we wish to adopt some attitude towards a proposition...but find ourselves thwarted by ignorance of what exactly the proposition is. We might know it only as 'what Oscar thinks' or 'Einstein's principle'; ...or ...we may wish to cover infinitely many propositions (in the course of generalizing) and simply can't have all of them in mind. (pp.2-3)

(b) What is it about truth that enables it to play this logical role? Truth is such that the "uncontroversial instances of the equivalence schema,

(E) It is true that p if and only if p." (p.7)  
all hold.

(c) Horwich's "minimal theory" says that each instance of (E) is an axiom of the theory,<sup>1</sup> and that is all it says (p.21). There is no more to truth than is captured by this infinite list of

biconditionals. "The entire conceptual and theoretical role of truth may be explained on this basis" (p.6). Truth does not have "some hidden structure awaiting our discovery". It does not have an "underlying nature [that] will account for [a statement's, a belief's, etc.] relations to other ingredients of reality" and hence that is important for "a host of problems in logic, semantics and epistemology" (p.2). Truth is not a "complex or naturalistic" property (p.11) and so is "unsusceptible to conceptual or scientific analysis" (p.6). It is no more an ordinary property of entities than is existence (which is not to say that it is not a property at all; pp.38-9).

A disappointing feature of the book is that Horwich makes little attempt to relate his theory to other deflationary theories, in particular to the prosentential theory of Dorothy Grover, Joseph Camp, and Nuel Belnap (1975). So far as I can see, the two theories are in agreement over (a) but not over (b). Horwich treats the truth term as a metalinguistic predicate the meaning of which is given simply by its use in instances of (E). Grover, Camp and Belnap treat the term not as a predicate but as a syncategorematic part of an object-language "prosentence". Prosentences are to sentences as pronouns are to nouns. They are anaphoric devices with a dual role: that of laziness, as in 'That is true'; and that of variables, as in 'Everything Wittgenstein said was true'. Their meaning, hence the meaning of the truth term, falls out of that anaphoric role. Both Horwich and the prosententialist treat the truth term as anomalous, but they locate the anomaly in different places. For Horwich, the term is syntactically normal - its a predicate - but semantically odd: the explanation of its meaning by reference to instances of (E) will be totally different from that of any other predicate. For the prosententialist, the term is syntactically odd.

The oddness lies not so much in the idea of a prosentence - for that is analogous to a pronoun - but in the idea of the truth term as merely a syncategorematic part of the sentence. It is unclear to me what, if any, significance there is to this difference.<sup>ii</sup>

One aspect of Horwich's presentation will be unattractive to many, as Horwich is aware: he takes truth to be a property of propositions. He has a lot to say in justification. He finds support in ordinary language (p.17) and in the logical form of thought attributions (pp.89-96). He thinks that utterances, the obvious alternative objects of truth, cause problems because of indexicals and foreign languages (p.14). None of this will seem in the least convincing to those who think that propositions are creatures of darkness. However, it turns out to be unimportant<sup>iii</sup> because Horwich later presents a version of the minimal theory for utterances (pp.103-7).

The most difficult part of a deflationary theory of truth to grasp is (c): there is no more to truth's role or nature than is described by the deflationist in parts (a) and (b). What exactly does a substantivist assert that the deflationist denies? I shall consider nature first and then role.

#### NATURE

There are some "quick and easy" ways of distinguishing deflationary from substantive truth that turn out, on close inspection, to be rather unhelpful:

(1) One might say, as Horwich does not, that deflationary truth differs from substantive truth in not really having a nature. But it is not clear what it is to really have a nature. Why wouldn't (b) above count as a description of the nature of truth?

(2) One might accept that deflationary truth has a nature but claim, as Horwich does, that its nature differs from that of substantive truth in not being "hidden" or "underlying" (p.2). But it is not clear what it is for a nature to be hidden or underlying. In what respect is the nature revealed by (b) not so? This nature is certainly not obvious.

(3) One might try to make the distinction by talking of properties. Thus it is common to claim that, on a deflationary view unlike a substantive view, truth is not a property.<sup>iv</sup> But what determines whether something is a property? Implicit in the common claim is a selective realism about properties that allows only something "explanatory," "scientific," or whatever, to be a property. Those with different views on property realism make what is essentially the same point in different ways. Thus, Horwich, an unselective property realist, is making this point when he claims that truth is not a "naturalistic" property (p. 11). And someone who is a nominalist, or who wishes to remain neutral on the issue of property realism, would make the same point as follows: on the deflationary view, it is not explanatory to say that something is true. Since the issue of property realism is clearly irrelevant to the issue of the nature of truth, the point is best made in the latter neutral way, without any talk of properties.

Whichever way the point is made, it is certainly important for our distinction, as we shall see below. But it should be noted that the point primarily concerns the role of truth not its nature; it concerns what truth does rather than what it is; it concerns (a) rather than (b).

Horwich moves beyond the "quick and easy" ways of drawing the distinction when he claims that there is nothing more to truth than the "uncontroversial instances" of the equivalence schema. This is helpful, but we need to go further. What more, exactly, do substantivists claim that there is to truth than instances of the schema? They think, as Horwich puts it, that truth has a "scientific analysis" (p. 6). I suggest that this is revealed, crucially, in explanations of why instances of the schema hold.

Consider an instance of Horwich's equivalence schema for utterances (p. 106):

(I) 'Schnee ist weiss' is true if and only if snow is white. In virtue of what does (I) hold? According to the minimalist, it holds for two reasons. First, because if (I) is an "uncontroversial instance" then it is an axiom of the theory of truth and so partly definitive of truth. Second, because (I) is an uncontroversial instance. What makes it so is that 'snow is white' translates 'schnee ist weiss.' Given this relation between two expressions (I) is a

trivial consequence of minimalist truth. In contrast, according to the substantivist, (I) holds because 'schnee ist weiss' is related in certain ways to the world; for example, it holds because 'schnee ist weiss' is verified in certain circumstances; or (partly) because 'schnee' refers to snow. This is a far from trivial scientific explanation of (I) in terms of language-world relations.

Could someone be a substantivist and yet deny the need for a "scientific analysis" of truth? It would seem so. Such a substantivist would be what Hartry Field has called a "semanticalist" (1972: 92), the anti-reductionist analogue in semantics of a dualist about the mind or a vitalist about life. If this substantivist is to distinguish herself from the deflationist she must at least claim that (I) holds because of some relation that 'schnee ist weiss' has to the world. What she denies is the need to explain this relation.

Though this position does seem possible, it is surely implausible. Why should we believe in such a notion of truth? If the semanticalist is to have an answer it must be in terms of the explanatory role of truth. But what if the semanticalist took her anti-reductionism further? Not only is truth not explained it is not explanatory; it is, as Georges Rey nicely put it, "epiphenomenal." At this point substantivism lacks all motivation. To be plausible, substantivism must accept the onus of explaining the nature of truth and of describing its explanatory role.

#### ROLE

The deflationist thinks that truth has a logical role that does not require it to be substantive. In contrast, it has been claimed that truth must be substantive for various purposes: for the explanation of success; to save realism; to justify scientific methodology; for the explanation of language and logic. For the most part, Horwich does an excellent job of casting doubt on these claims. I particularly applaud two of his arguments that fly in the face of so much of the contemporary discussion of realism.

In the first he argues that "the realism/anti-realism issue ... [has] nothing to do with truth" (p.54); "the choice of a theory of truth is orthogonal to the issues surrounding realism" (p.60). Insofar as truth has a role in these issues, that role is only the minimalist one that it can have anywhere. In the second he argues that substantive truth has nothing to do with accounting for the empirical success of scientific theories. "The theory that nothing goes faster than light works well because nothing goes faster than light" (p.50). Exactly. Truth can be useful in stating such claims, particularly when we want to generalize them, but this role for truth is precisely that of minimalist truth.<sup>v</sup>

Horwich is much less impressive in rejecting two other putative roles for substantive truth: to explain individual success and in semantics.

#### Individual Success

Some have thought that a substantive notion of truth is needed to explain the success of an individual in achieving his goals.<sup>vi</sup>

I have two criticisms of Horwich's treatment of this idea. The first is of his discussion of a certain explanation of success. Consider ... a person's beliefs of the form,  
(1) <If I perform action A then state of affairs S will be realized>.

The psychological role of such beliefs is to motivate the performance of A when S is desired. When this process takes place, and if the belief involved is true, then the desired result will in fact obtain. In other words, if I have belief (1) and desire S, then I will do A. But if my belief is true, then, given merely the equivalence axioms, it follows that if I do A then S will be realized. Therefore, by modus ponens, S will be realized; I will get what I wanted. (p.44)

Horwich takes this explanation to support the principle, "True beliefs facilitate successful behaviour". He argues, rightly, that the explanation involves only a minimalist notion of truth. However, he goes on to claim, on the strength of this argument, that minimalist truth plays "an explanatory role" in the principle. Indeed, he claims that the argument articulates "a certain mechanism by which true beliefs engender beneficial results" (p.45).

At best, these claims are very misleading. Horwich seems to be claiming that truth can be both minimalist and explanatory in some theory of people. Yet it is a central, and very important, fact about any deflationary notion of truth that it is not explanatory.<sup>vii</sup> On the one hand, if truth has only the logical role Horwich describes in (a), then it surely cannot have an explanatory role as well. On the other hand, if truth is explanatory - if it is in virtue of a belief having the property truth that it plays a certain causal role - then there must be more to it than he describes in (b). It must, after all, be substantive. Horwich seems to be trying to have his cake and eat it too.

Minimalist truth can, of course, feature in explanatory statements, for it can feature in statements of any sort. An explanation of the form,

p because q,  
can be rewritten,  
p because it is true that q.

And this can be rewritten,  
p because the belief that q is true.

This does not make truth or the true belief explanatory of p in anything but the most trivial of senses. Consider an example: "Exports are increasing because the dollar is falling" can be rewritten as "Exports are increasing because it is true that the dollar is falling" or "... because the belief that the dollar is falling is true". Truth and true belief have no explanatory role in this example: they have no role in the mechanism by which exports are increased. What has that role is the falling dollar.

Similarly, truth and true belief have no (non-trivial) explanatory role in Horwich's explanation. What is being explained? That, by performing A the person got what he wanted: the fulfilment of his desire S. What is the explanation? He got what he wanted

because if he performs A S is realized. This fact, determined solely by the world, is the explanation. It has nothing to do with his beliefs. We can, as always, rewrite the explanation: he got what he wanted because it is true that if he performs A S is realized; or because his belief that if he performs A S is realized is true.

But truth and true belief are no more explanatory of his success than they were of increasing exports.

No property of his belief has any (non-trivial) role in the explanation of the success of his behaviour. Indeed, the explanation of his success would be no different if he had lacked that belief.

Of course, the belief does have a role in causing the behaviour, but its truth has no significance for that role. And the behaviour would have been equally successful whatever its cause.

I have agreed with Horwich that only minimalist truth is involved in his explanation of success. I would like to see his further claim that truth is explanatory in the mechanisms leading to success as only misleading. This is difficult in the light of the following passage:

Moreover, such beliefs [as (1)] are more likely to be true if they are inferred from true premises; and very little of what we believe can be definitively excluded from the prospect of entering into such inferences as a premise. Therefore it is clear, in general, how true beliefs contribute to practical success. (p.45)

In discussing Horwich's example, we have seen that it is a certain worldly fact, and only derivatively the truth of a belief in (1), that explains success. To get to the reality underlying the above passage, we must strip away its talk of truth and belief. Thus its talk of a belief being "more likely to be true" should be about the likelihood of a certain worldly fact. In the example, this is the fact that if the person performs A S will be realized. This fact depends on others in that had they not been the case it would not have been the case. So each of those facts increases the likelihood of the given fact and hence contributes to the explanation of the person's success. Let the fact that q be one of those others. So the person is successful partly because q. We can rewrite this explanation: he is successful partly because it is true that q. If he believes that q, we can rewrite again: he is successful partly because his belief is true. In this trivial sense, and only in this trivial sense, does the truth of any of his beliefs have anything to do with increasing the likelihood that if he performs A S will be realized and hence that (1) is true. Only in this trivial sense does the truth of any of his beliefs make a contribution to explaining his success. Whether he had any particular belief, and whether he arrived at his belief in (1) by inference from true beliefs, by inference from false beliefs, or by consulting an oracle, are totally irrelevant to the explanation of his success. The only thing about his beliefs that is relevant is that any beliefs that concern the worldly facts that are part of the explanation must, for trivial reasons, be true.

Because of its expressive role, truth can play a role in any explanation. As a result one can be easily misled into thinking that truth is playing an explanatory role. A sure sign that it is not is that the explanation can be restated without any talk of truth or the bearers of truth. The role of truth in the explanation is then clearly trivial. Horwich's explanation is of this sort. Sometimes, however, we lack this sure sign: truth's role is not trivial. Yet it may still be worldly facts not true sentences or beliefs that are really explanatory: truth is needed not because it is explanatory but because our only way of identifying the worldly facts that are explanatory is by taking advantage of the expressive role of truth.

In sum, Horwich rightly claims that the notion of truth in his explanation of success is only minimalist but wrongly suggests that its role is explanatory rather than trivial.

My second criticism of Horwich's discussion of the principle, "True beliefs facilitate successful behaviour" is that the discussion is not directed at the interesting explanandum. If we consider the interesting one, some substantive property of beliefs - although I don't say substantive truth - must play a (non-trivial) role in the explanation of success.

What the principle is best thought of as attempting to explain is the following: In virtue of what are some of a person's beliefs conducive to bringing about successful actions (those that satisfy desires) and some beliefs not? This is quite different from what we have just, in effect, explained: Given that A occurred (as the result of beliefs), why did S (something desired) occur? We have seen that if the principle is to explain this latter success then it need involve only minimalist truth. For, only in a trivial sense is any property of a belief relevant to the explanation: it is the world that really does the explaining. What we now want explained does not take any action as given and concerns a dispositional property of belief. Among the many possible actions that a person's beliefs could lead to, some are successful and some are not. What property of a belief explains its tendency to bring about actions that are among the successful ones?

Horwich does not address this question at all. Minimalist truth will not help answer it. The answer must allude to some substantive naturalistic property of a belief that explains why beliefs that have it tend to produce behaviour that "cooperates with the world" to fulfil desires. Those who believe in substantive truth are likely to claim that it is the required property: they offer the principle, construed substantively. I am dubious of this claim, and Horwich must certainly reject it. However, he owes us a rival explanation appealing to a substantive property other than truth.

### Semantics

Many think that the best case for substantive truth is to be found in semantics: truth is the central concept in the explanation of the meaning of utterances and/or the contents of thoughts. Horwich's treatment of this view is far from decisive.

1. If truth-referential semantics is mistaken, as it must be if the minimal theory is correct, then we need an alternative semantics. Horwich is, of course, aware of this. He waves his hands toward Wittgenstein, Sellars, Quine, Harman, Peacock, and a "use theory" (pp.72-4, 97-103). It would be unreasonable to expect much more than this hand waving given the main concerns of Horwich's book.

However, it would be reasonable to expect some sensitivity to the fact that there are many who find all known use theories very inadequate. We expect this particularly in the light of his cursory dismissal of truth-referential semantics. Yet Horwich writes as if, with his brief discussion of use theory, semantics can be set to rest.

2. Truth-referential semantics comes in several guises. Horwich's explicit criticism of it applies only to one guise. This guise arises from two assumptions: first, the theory of meaning is identified with the theory of understanding; second, understanding is taken to consist in knowledge of truth conditions. His criticism of truth-conditional semantics in this guise is fairly effective (pp.71-4). However, the criticism does not count against the semantics in another guise which is, in my view, much more attractive: the semantics is offered as a theory of linguistic and/or mental representations, a theory that is distinct from, though related to, a theory of understanding. Strangely, Horwich does not address this view directly. Nevertheless, his discussion of the idea of explaining truth in terms of naturalistic causal theories of reference (pp.120-4) is an implicit criticism.

Three basic ideas have emerged for causal theories of reference: explanation in terms of the historical cause; explanation in terms of the reliable cause; and explanation in terms of a "teleofunction" explained along Darwinian lines. What are Horwich's criticisms? He makes an important point: there should be no presumption that reference requires a naturalistic explanation. He nicely illustrates that reference, like truth, has a "logical" role.<sup>viii</sup> So a deflationary view of it may be correct. But, of course, this does not show that the deflationary view is correct. He makes two points against the historical idea: that Kripke did not offer a complete theory; and that direct-reference theories are "an over-reaction to Kripke's arguments" (p.122). But then Kripke did not pretend to present a complete theory and direct-reference theories have only a tenuous relation to historical theories.<sup>ix</sup> Beyond this, Horwich claims, without argument, that nobody has formulated a definite theory to capture the historical idea. And he implies, again without argument, that all attempts to develop the other two ideas have failed.

Doubts about all available causal theories of reference are appropriate enough: they seem to have missing pieces, or to be otherwise implausible. Yet it is early days in the attempt to find such theories. Horwich writes as if it is already clear that the attempt is hopeless. I don't think that the evidence supports this.

We need some theory of meaning. Truth-referential semantics still seems to be the best bet. Horwich prefers a use theory. But, surely, we are still a long way from a plausible worked-out use theory. It will be particularly difficult for such a theory to specify precisely



which causal connections to reality constitute the "proper use" and hence the meaning of an expression. I see no reason to be more optimistic about this problem than about the similar problem that has proved so difficult for causal theories of reference: specifying precisely which causal connections to reality constitute reference.

In sum, Horwich exaggerates the strength of his case. The difficulties of truth-referential semantics, together with the plausibility of the deflationary view of truth, count against that semantics. However, the lack of a plausible rival semantics counts against the deflationary view of truth.

I noted many mistakes in references, bibliography, and index, the most amusing of which was the attribution of Psychosemantics to Kit Fine.

Truth is one of the most difficult and confusing topics in philosophy. Horwich's book, Truth, is a clear, informed, and provocative treatment of the topic. I thoroughly recommend the book to everyone in the philosophy of language, philosophy of science, and metaphysics.\*

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#### NOTES

i. The specification of the axioms has to be a bit more complicated to allow for propositions that are not expressible in English (pp.19-20).

ii. Robert Brandom has proposed an attractive variation on the prosentential theory which may make the truth term seem less anomalous.

The prosententialist view that the term is merely syncategorematic goes with the view that, for example, 'that' in 'That is true' is not referential (as it is for Horwich). Brandom finds this unsatisfactory. He proposes that 'that' be treated as referential and that the truth term be seen as a prosentence forming operator (1988: 88-90).

Before Horwich's book was available, Dorothy Grover made an interesting comparison of prosententialism with "disquotational" theories (1990). Horwich's theory is disquotational. Her main criticism of such theories is that they fall short in failing to give an account of "what is said" in a sentence like 'That is true' (p.9).

In contrast, she thinks that prosententialism gives an account by assimilating such sentences to the semantically familiar. I take it that Horwich would resist her question. He would refer her to the instances of (E) and claim that no more need be said.

iii. Hartry Field (1992) does not agree.

iv. E.g. Boghossian 1990, p. 161. My views on this matter have been influenced by Georges Rey in a recent collaboration (Devitt and Rey 1991).

v. I have argued along similar lines (1984).

vi. The confusion in the realism literature over the role of truth is heightened by the conflation of this individual success with the above-mentioned theoretical success.

vii. See, e.g., Brandom 1988: 91-2.

viii. See Brandom 1984 for a deflationary theory of reference inspired by the prosentential theory of truth.

ix. Devitt 1989.

x. I am grateful to Hartry Field, Paul Horwich, and Georges Rey for comments that have led to improvements.