

Truth: A Contemporary Philosophical Debate and its Bearing on Cognitive Science

Traditional conceptions of the significance of truth and its intractability

In contemporary philosophy, one finds widespread agreement about two claims concerning the concept of truth. First, that (A) truth is an absolutely central notion, indispensable in any attempt to give a philosophical characterization of ourselves and our place in the world. And this is so because it appears that we need the concept of truth, if we are to give an adequate account of the aims of science, the relations of language to the world, as well as logic – the character of sound reasoning – to mention some central cases. Now, the (apparent) centrality of the notion of truth lends urgency to the task of giving an account of the nature of truth. For, as the examples just noted seem to indicate, insight into the underlying essence of truth promises to shed light on just about every other aspect of our conceptual scheme (the fundamental concepts in terms of which we think of ourselves and our place in the world).

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However, a large number of contemporary philosophers would also agree that (B) truth has proved extremely resistant to elucidation. Not to put too fine a point on it, we hardly seem to have made any progress in giving an account of the nature of truth. The main alternatives, among traditional theories of truth, are correspondence and coherence theories of truth. They illustrate the difficulties that we face. The central idea of a correspondence theory can be expressed as the claim that

X is true iff X corresponds to the facts

The key idea of a coherence theory, on the other hand, is that

X is true iff X belongs to a sufficiently coherent and comprehensive system of beliefs or propositions

The problem with correspondence theories is that they make use of notions – like that of a fact – which presuppose the notion of truth, thus rendering them viciously circular. The central objection to coherence theories, on the other hand, is that there can be rival and divergent

systems of belief that are equally coherent – one containing p and the other containing its negation (not-p), for example. And since p and not-p cannot both be true, the coherence theory appears to be vulnerable to straightforward counter-examples. Basically, it seems that no one has yet been able to come up with a theory of truth which is neither false nor viciously circular.

Contemporary ‘deflationist’ or ‘disquotationalist’ views of truth

In a way, if you believe (A), (B) may not seem all that surprising: the reason why the notion of truth is so difficult to elucidate is simply that it is so fundamental. (There are no more basic notions in terms of which it could be analysed.) However, there is a distinctly modern view of truth – variously known as ‘deflationism’, ‘disquotationalism’ or ‘minimalism’ – which holds that the notion of truth is neither deep nor difficult. Rather, it is both easy to explain as well as ‘metaphysically trivial’ – which is to say that it has virtually no bearing on any important philosophical issue.

Deflationists take as their starting point something that is common ground between all parties to the dispute. But how we are to formulate this important area of agreement depends on a prior issue: whether we think of truth as a property of sentences (utterances) or of what those sentences express - propositions (as philosophers like to say). I shall circumvent a number of important technical difficulties, and crudely illustrate the matter in terms of propositions as well as sentences (utterances). For (almost) any proposition – that snow is white, for example – we would all agree that

the proposition that snow is white is true if and only if snow is white

Similarly, and suitably qualified, it seems hard to gainsay that

‘Snow is white’ is true if and only if snow is white

Sentences of this form are often called T-sentences, they are instances of the schema: (T) X is true if and only if p. There are some philosophically important exceptions where the schema does not hold – paradoxes and statements that are neither true nor false. For these cases, we would not – or should not – accept the corresponding instance of the (T)-schema. The deflationist knows that there are such cases, and suggests that we leave them aside (for the time being).

He or she then goes on to suggest that the expression ‘is true’ is exhaustively characterized (that is to say, implicitly or explicitly defined) by the totality of (acceptable) T-sentences. Furthermore, the deflationist holds that this body of sentences tells us all there is to know about truth. This is the characteristic, defining thesis of deflationism.

The deflationist’s view of the point of ‘true’

The deflationist’s view of the nature of truth gives rise to an immediate objection. For if truth really is as trivial as they would have it, it seems a mystery why there should even be a word for it in the language. The deflationist responds by insisting that the truth-predicate subserves a real though strictly limited purpose. (It is important to see what this purpose is, for it gives rise to the dominant argument for deflationism.) Deflationists

often point to Quine as the philosopher who first clearly identified the utility of the truth-predicate, though this is in all likelihood incorrect. At any rate, the explanation that he did more than anyone else to promote this is that the point of the truth predicate is to enable us to say things about the world (non-linguistic reality) by talking about sentences.

Thus, instead of expressing myself directly, by saying that the sun is shining, for example, I could – if I wished – ‘ascend to the level of sentences’ and say that the sentence ‘the sun is shining’ is true. In this case, however, there would be no real point in doing so. The utility of the truth-predicate, we are told, stems from the fact that there are situations in which we are prevented – because of ignorance or memory failure, or whatever – from expressing directly the things we want to say about the world. Here, the truth-predicate earns its keep.

Suppose I have had a discussion with someone who said something with which I agreed. The next day, I may have forgotten exactly what it was that he or she said for which reason I cannot express it directly. Nevertheless, I can refer to that assertion using a form of words like ‘what X said yesterday (about such and such), and then go on to re-affirm that assertion by saying ‘What X said yesterday (about such and such) is true’. This last sentence stands in, or acts as a surrogate, for the proposition that I cannot now express.

The following is, perhaps, a more interesting case of this use of ‘true’: consider a theory about the physical world – such as a typical first order version of the Euclidean theory of space – which is not finitely axiomatizable (because it contains a number of axiom schemas each having infinitely many axioms as instances). Suppose one has grounds for rejecting the theory without knowing exactly which part of it to reject, or suppose that one accepts it, but regards it as contingently true. In the first case, one wants to deny the infinite conjunction of the axioms, and in the second case, to assert the possibility of the negation of this infinite conjunction. However, we are not in a position to complete the infinite conjunction, for which reason we cannot express ourselves directly. Instead, we make use of the truth predicate: In the first case, one will put the rejection by saying ‘Not every axiom of this theory is true’. In the second case, one will express one’s acceptance by saying ‘It might have been the case that not every axiom of this theory is true’. (I have borrowed this example from Hartry Field, one of the leading proponents of deflationism.)

The case for deflationism

In fact, the deflationist claims that the aforementioned use of ‘true’ is the only thing we really need it for. And this gives rise to the following central argument for deflationism:

The point, and only serious purpose, of the truth predicate (our notion of truth) is the ‘logical’ one of providing ‘alternative objects of our attitudes’, in particular surrogates for infinite conjunctions or disjunctions. To fulfill this role, all that is required is that it be governed by the equivalence schema. Thus, there is simply no need to go beyond the deflationist account of truth: no reason to suppose that there is more to truth than what can be read off of the acceptable instances of the equivalence schema.

Assessing the plausibility of deflationism and seeing what is really at stake

In a full-dress assessment of deflationism, we would have to consider what is to be said for and against the operative premise (the first one), and whether the conclusion follows from the premises (once the content of the relevant propositions has been made clear). Here, I shall merely have space to bring to your attention the consequences of the deflationary conception of truth.

Considered in isolation, truth, as defined by deflationists, appears to be entirely trivial. What needs emphasis, however, is that adopting that notion as one's notion of truth has extremely wide-ranging consequences. The point is that someone who endorses the deflationist conception of truth is thereby committed to a highly controversial view of the nature of meaning (and mental content).

There is a dominant tradition in the philosophy of language and mind which takes the notion of a truth-condition to be a key notion in the philosophy of language (and mind). In the case of language, the underlying idea – which was perhaps first made explicit by Frege – is that to understand a sentence is to have grasped its truth-condition. That is to say, to know the meaning of a declarative sentence is to know what has to be the case for it to be true.

A deflationist speaking of truth cannot hold that the meaning of a sentence is to be identified with its truth-condition – for then there would be more to truth than is expressed by the T-sentences. What that means is that if you think that there are compelling reasons for holding on to a truth-conditional conception of meaning, those reasons would give you grounds for rejecting the deflationist view of truth. The deflationist, however, is not going to give up so easily. For there is, in fact, another general approach to the nature of meaning, which holds that meaning is to be explained in terms of something like use rather than truth-conditions. The most famous proponent, and maybe originator, of this idea is Wittgenstein - with whom we associate the slogan that 'meaning is use'.

Here, there is only time to note the following main points. First of all, we are in a position to see that the fundamental question facing theorists of truth is how to conceive of the relation between truth and meaning. Secondly, though 'use theories of meaning' have been much discussed over the past forty years or so, no one has to date presented a theory of that kind with anything like the level of detail and plausibility possessed by extant, truth-conditional theories. For this reason, as well as others, even a moderate claim on behalf of deflationism – that the balance of evidence is currently in their favour – is highly questionable.

Truth at the interface between philosophy and cognitive science

Hopefully, I have managed to show that the issue over deflationism is one that is of central concern to philosophers. However one might still ask whether the issue has any bearing on matters outside philosophy. To see that it does, one only needs a brief reminder of the kinds of things that psychologists and cognitive scientists of various stripes seek to understand, and of the terms in which their explanations are couched. For among the things that they – including researchers at the CAS – are actively seeking to explain are such phenomena as vision, memory and action. There is not a shred of doubt, then, that intentional notions, and the notion of

representational or truth-conditional content, crop up throughout these disciplines. The notions in question are clearly employed in the initial characterization of the phenomena to be explained, but they also figure crucially in the theories which seek to account for them. Modern cognitive science, then, is up to its neck in truth-conditional content.

Now, it may occur to you that this shows more than that there is a connection between ongoing scientific concerns and the abstruse philosophical debate about deflationism. For it may seem that an appeal to the cognitive sciences serves to give a decisive answer to the philosophical debate about truth. The very fact that there is a successful ongoing scientific practice which is committed to the use of the notion of representational content gives us sufficient grounds – so the thinking goes – for supposing that there is more to truth than deflationists maintain.

However things are a good deal more complicated than that. A successful ongoing scientific practice may give us strong *prima facie* reasons for thinking that deflationism's view of truth is wrong-headed. Nevertheless, a philosophically illuminating resolution of the issue over the nature of truth, and its relation to meaning, cannot simply appeal to ongoing scientific practice. For one thing, a philosopher will need to know more about the precise nature of the concepts that psychologists and scientists make use of, as well as what scientists are really committed to in their talk of meaning and content. Related to this point is the fact that one of the things that many philosophers find deeply puzzling – and rightly so, in my view – is an assumption shared by science and common sense. Namely, that mental states can have causal effects by virtue of their possession of representational content.

In other words, it is unclear exactly what science tells us about the nature of meaning – whether meaning needs to be explained in terms of truth-conditions or not. And for that reason, current scientific practice, on its own, cannot yield a decisive answer to the philosophical question about the nature of truth. On the other hand, it would, of course, be completely absurd to suppose that science should not make use of the notions that it does, until they have been clarified to the extent which would suit the interests of philosophers.

The point is rather that each camp stands to gain – though in different ways - from keeping abreast of the activities of the other. Philosophy is in many respects a second-order discipline. In the present case, this means that philosophers arguably have to study basic features of the cognitive sciences carefully, if they are to come up with well-grounded answers to their question about the nature of truth. The sciences, on the other hand, do not need to turn to philosophy in order to solve the tasks that they set themselves. The contribution of philosophy to the sciences lies rather in the possibility of a deeper, or reflective, understanding of the content of the claims advanced in scientific theories.