TRUTH, MEANING, EXPERIENCE

Anil Gupta

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To

Kamal, Ravi, Anita

Sandhya, Rachna, and the memory of Brij Mohan

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INTRODUCTION

Three themes animate the essays below: (1) Certain kinds of logical interdependence are legitimate. (2) Logical interdependence provides a key to understanding a variety of topics of interest to philosophers—including truth, rationality, and experience. (3) Current conceptions of meaning need to be loosened up; only then can we make sense of logical interdependence and certain other phenomena.

Truth. The concept of truth appears, at first sight, to be perfectly clear and simple. The content of this concept is exhausted, it appears, by the *T-biconditionals*, that is, by biconditionals of the form

(T) 'A' is true iff A.[1]

Aristotle remarked that the two sides of the biconditionals imply each other (*Categories*, 14^b14–18). Alfred Tarski's Convention T extends Aristotle's remark and lays it down as an adequacy condition on a definition of truth that it imply the biconditionals.

1. Here and in essays below, I follow current practice and focus on sentential truth. A parallel story can be told about propositional truth.

As usual, 'iff' abbreviates 'if and only if'.

The seeming clarity and simplicity of truth has led some philosophers to advocate *deflationism*. They declare that truth is a lightweight concept, unfit for substantive work in philosophy. Yet the very intuition that creates the appearance of clarity and simplicity also generates paradoxes—for example, the Liar paradox—as Eubulides, a contemporary of Aristotle observed. This has prompted other philosophers to declare that truth is an inconsistent concept, unfit for any work unless it is suitably reformed or restricted.

The precise relationship of the T-biconditionals to the concept of truth is, thus, of philosophical importance, and one of my aims in chapters 1-3 is to clarify this relationship. I argue in chapter 1 ("A Critique of Deflationism") that deflationism subscribes to, and needs to subscribe to, much too strong a linkage between the T-biconditionals and the concept of truth—for example, to the idea that the T-biconditionals fix the sense of 'true'. I argue that the strong linkages needed to sustain deflationism do not obtain and that nothing in its relationship to the T-biconditionals renders the concept of truth unfit for substantive philosophical work (e.g., in the theory of meaning). I go on to offer reasons to think that truth is a highly puzzling notion, one that defies all simple philosophical analyses.

Deflationism is inspired by Tarski's groundbreaking work on truth and, in particular, by his Convention T. In chapter 2 ("An Argument Against Tarski's Convention T"), I clarify Convention T, and I distinguish various readings of it—readings found in the literature and sometimes offered by Tarski himself. I show that the readings of Convention T that support deflationism are false, and I isolate the kernel of truth about truth contained in Convention T. This kernel can be formulated as follows: under certain idealized conditions, the T-biconditionals fix the *intension* of truth; in other words, the T-biconditionals lay down the truth-conditions for truth-attributions. This kernel provides no support whatsoever for deflationism.

The argument of chapters 1-2 sets the stage for chapter 3 ("Remarks on Definitions and the Concept of Truth"). Here I argue

that truth is a circular concept and that the kernel of truth contained in Convention T shows it to be so. I observe that the behavior of truth parallels the behavior of concepts with circular definitions. Traditional logical theory takes circular definitions to be incoherent and thus illegitimate. I show, however, that we can make perfectly good sense of them. I sketch a simple semantics for circular definitions, and I provide a logical calculus for working with them. Circular definitions, I go on to argue, not only are logically coherent but can do useful philosophical work: they can help us understand some of our ordinary concepts. The behavior of truth, in particular, becomes comprehensible once we see this concept as circular. Tarski suggested that each T-biconditional serves as a partial definition of truth: its right-hand side spells out the conditions under which the sentence mentioned in the left-hand side falls under the concept of truth. Plainly, however, if T-biconditionals are partial definitions, they are sometimes *circular* partial definitions: their definientia (i.e., their right-hand sides) sometimes contain 'true'. Tarski responded to this situation by eliminating circularity through his division of truth into a hierarchy of concepts. I point out in chapter 3 that we obtain a better description of the concept if we accept the circularity of the T-conditionals at face value. The theory of truth then falls out as a corollary of the theory of definitions. The paradoxical behavior of truth ceases to seem strange; it is precisely what is to be expected if truth is a circular concept with the T-biconditionals as its partial definitions.

The two principal theses of chapter 3, then, are the following: First, circular definitions (and, more generally, systems of interdependent definitions) are logically legitimate, and we need to revise logical theory to take account of this fact. Second, truth is a circular concept. These theses require much more supporting argument than I am able to provide in chapter 3. In particular, the theses need to be placed in the context of a much richer theory of interdependent definitions than that sketched in this chapter. (The theory of chapter 3 is adequate only for a restricted class of definitions: *finite*

definitions, as characterized in chapter 4.) In a longer (and some say difficult) work, Nuel Belnap and I provide a richer theory of definitions, and we mount a fuller argument for the circularity of truth.[2] I hope chapter 3 is useful as an easy introduction to the topic and for illustrating the possibility of legitimate and useful logical interdependence.

In summary, the relationship of the T-biconditionals to the concept of truth is that the biconditionals define the intension of truth (under certain idealized conditions), but they do not fix the sense or content of truth. The first idea implies that truth is a circular concept, while the second casts doubt on deflationism. Truth, as I see it, is neither incoherent nor simple. It is instead a coherent and philosophically useful circular concept. This is the idea that motivates chapters 1–3, and in whose aid their argument is directed.

Rationality. The simple theory of circular definitions sketched in chapter 3 has a striking application. It can be used to construct a theory of rational choice that works well in a range of simple games. In chapter 4 ("On Circular Concepts"), I build a circular definition of rational choice on the basis of a natural principle, and I show that the resulting theory improves on existing methods (e.g., iterated-dominance arguments and solutions of games through unique Nash equilibria). The theory is admittedly of limited scope. Nonetheless, it suffices to show that the concept of rational choice is circular, and it brings out the power of circular definitions in a simple situation. (Logical interdependence is useful also in understanding another dimension of rationality—namely, empirical rationality. I sketch this application in the next subsection.)

In chapter 5 ("Definition and Revision"), I respond to some important objections, due to Vann McGee and Donald A. Martin, to the theory of circular definitions and its application to truth. In a

2. *Revision Theory of Truth* (abbreviated henceforth to '*Revision Theory*').

postscript to the chapter, I briefly address some more recent objections due to Hartry Field and Lionel Shapiro.[3]

Experience. The question about experience I address in chapters 7–8 concerns the rational role of experience in judgment. It is plain that experience plays some role in rendering a judgment rational. Suppose you make the perceptual judgment that a crow is sitting in a tree, on the basis of your visual experience as you, say, look out of the window. Your perceptual judgment may well be rational, and if it is rational, your visual experience plainly plays some role in rendering the judgment rational. What is this role? Let us adopt the following terminology: let us say that *the given* in an experience is the total rational contribution of that experience. Then the question I address is this: what is the given in experience?

A commonsense answer to this question—one embraced by Naïve Realists—is that the given in an experience consists simply of ordinary judgments of perception (or of a special subclass of them). In experience, one is directly aware, according to this view, of ordinary objects and some of their properties and relations. The rational role of experience is to inform the subject (or to provide her with default entitlement) that such-and-such objects have so-and-so properties.

A philosophical answer to our question—one embraced by the likes of Descartes, Hume, and Russell (and perhaps by a large majority of "the mighty dead," to use Robert Brandom's apt expression)—is that the given in experience consists of extraordinary judgments about a special realm of entities. In experience, these philosophers hold, one is directly aware not of ordinary objects but of special mind-dependent entities (e.g., sense-data). The rational role of experience is to inform the subject of the existence and characteristics of these special entities. Let us call this the "Cartesian position".

3. Mr. Matthew Wampler-Doty recently informed me that the propositional fragment of revision theory of definitions has been anticipated, in the context of circuit design, by Claude Shannon. Shannon interpreted revision sequences in temporal terms, however.

I believe that the objections that the commonsense and Cartesian positions bring to bear against each other are sound. The commonsense position is correct to insist against the Cartesian position that the rationality of ordinary judgments of perception cannot be founded on judgments about (e.g.) sense-data. On the other hand, the Cartesian position is correct that ordinary judgments of perception cannot constitute the given. The rational role of an experience depends solely on the subjective character of the experience, and this character is too thin to entitle the subject to anything as thick as ordinary judgments of perception.

In chapter 7 ("The Given in Conscious Experience"), I argue that the common error underlying the two positions is logical. These positions assume that the given is propositional in form. I offer in chapter 7 another way of conceiving the given, one that recognizes the interdependence of views and perceptual judgments. Experience by itself does not, I suggest, render any judgment rational. The rationality of perceptual judgments depends on the rationality of view; and the latter depends, in turn, on the former. We obtain a better picture of experience and knowledge, I argue in chapter 7, by taking this interdependence seriously. The picture makes better sense of our epistemic practices.

In chapter 8 ("Equivalence, Reliability, and Convergence"), I address some valuable objections, due to John McDowell, Christopher Peacocke, and Ram Neta. These objections help me place the picture I am offering in a clearer light.

Meaning. I argue for liberalizing our conception of meaning along two dimensions. The first liberalization is motivated by the theory of interdependent definitions. Traditional rejection of these definitions arises, I argue in chapter 3, from an overly restricted conception of meaning—namely, that the meaning of a predicate (e.g.) provides a *rule of application*, a rule for demarcating the objects to which the predicate applies from those to which it does not apply. Interdepen-

dent definitions fail, in general, to supply such a rule. Nonetheless, they do impart meaning to their definienda. This meaning provides, I argue, a *rule of revision*, not a rule of application.

The second liberalization is motivated by the need to make sense of discourses that embody fundamental misconceptions about the world. I argue in chapter 6 ("Meaning and Misconceptions") that neither representational nor conceptual-role semantics does justice to these discourses; and I offer the ideas of "effective content" and "frame" as useful tools for making sense of them. The picture of empirical rationality I paint in chapters 7–8 underlines the importance of the topic of chapter 6. For, according to that picture, in empirical inquiry, the subject does not necessarily move from truth to truth. The role of experience is not to supply truths, but to enable the subject to improve and enrich her view of the world. The subject may begin empirical inquiry with an erroneous view, even with a view that contains fundamental misconceptions. Still, experience can guide her to the truth. It is essential for understanding empirical rationality, therefore, that we understand how discourse functions in the presence of misconceptions.

Concerning this volume. The essays in this volume need not be read in the order in which they appear below. The only dependency relations between them are that essays 4–5 presuppose essay 3, and essay 8 presupposes essay 7. The essays may be read in any order consistent with these relations. Four of the essays use very little or no formalism (1 and 6–8). The remaining four essays presuppose no more than a first course in logic. I have deliberately kept technicalities to a minimum in this volume.

I have left the substance of the original essays essentially unchanged. I have removed unhelpful duplications and extraneous material; I have corrected minor errors and made notation more uniform across papers; and I have improved phrasing in several places. Only in two papers have I made more significant changes. First, I

have dropped the last three paragraphs from §2 of the original "Definition and Revision". These paragraphs deal with technical issues concerning limit stages in revision processes, and I thought it best not to impose them on the readers of this volume. Second, I have filled out the picture of empirical knowledge sketched in chapter 7 by expanding a bit the explanation of "acceptable initial views".

ONE

A CRITIQUE OF DEFLATIONISM

1.1. Introduction

The past century has witnessed two types of philosophical debates over the concept of truth. In the first, *substantive*, type of debate we find rival theories of truth put forward that seem to have, and whose proponents have taken them to have, significant metaphysical and epistemological implications. An early example of this type is the debate in the early 1900s between the British Idealists (F. H. Bradley and his followers) and the Logical Atomists (Bertrand Russell and his followers). The Idealists defended a coherence theory of truth, whereas the Atomists argued for a correspondence theory. This dispute over the theory of truth was not, and was not taken by the participants to be, a local disagreement. It was integral to the larger metaphysical debate between the two sides over monism and pluralism and over idealism and realism. A more recent example of the substantive type is the debate between the realist and the antirealist found in Michael Dummett's writings. The crux of the debate here is what notion of truth is admissible. Dummett's antirealist argues for a notion of truth that is constrained by evidence, while the realist defends the admissibility of a radically nonepistemic notion.

In the first type of debate, then, we find theses put forward and defended that have (or at least seem to have) substantial philosophical implications. Debates of this type presuppose that truth has a substantial role to play in philosophical inquiry. In the debates of the second, *metaphilosophical*, type the presupposition is called into question. An early example of this type is the debate over the claim, made by some Logical Positivists, that truth is a metaphysical concept and hence ought to be banished from all rigorous and scientific thought. A decisive contribution to this debate was made by Alfred Tarski, who gave a definition of truth (for certain languages) that was adequate by the Positivists' own strictures. Tarski's definition used only terms that the Positivists found legitimate, and it defined a notion that was provably coextensive with truth. Tarski's work was widely viewed as establishing the legitimacy and the usefulness of truth in philosophical inquiry. One result of its influence was a shift away from a syntactical conception of language and toward a semantical one.[1]

Ironically, Tarski's work, while refuting one sort of skepticism about the usefulness of truth, provided a basis for a different, more compelling, kind of skepticism. This new kind of skepticism, *deflationism*, maintains that truth is a simple and clear concept and has no substantial role to play in philosophy. Substantive debates over truth, according to deflationism, are in error, not because they work with a notion that is metaphysically loaded (and hence corrupt), but because they work with a notion that is metaphysically lightweight. Deflationism has provoked a large debate among philosophers, a debate that provides a contemporary instance of the second, metaphilosophical, type of debate distinguished above.

A deflationary view typically consists of two parts: (i) a description of the meaning and function of 'true' and (ii) a derivation from that description of deflationary consequences concerning truth. As an example of (i), consider the following passage from Michael

1. See, for instance, Rudolf Carnap, *Introduction to Semantics*.

Williams; it contains a popular account of the meaning and function of 'true'. (In the next section I shall explain and discuss the account in detail.)

> [W]hen we have pointed to certain formal features of the truth-predicate (notably its 'disquotational' feature) and explained why it is useful to have a predicate like this (e.g. as a device for asserting infinite conjunctions), we have said just about everything there is to be said about truth.[2]

Examples of (ii) can be found in §§1.3 and 1.4 below. The following extracts illustrate the sorts of deflationary consequences that are often drawn. The first extract is from Richard Rorty; the remaining two are from, respectively, Scott Soames and Paul Horwich:[3]

> [T]ruth is not the sort of thing one should expect to have a philosophically interesting theory about.[4]

> What does seem right about Tarski's approach is its deflationist character. . . . Truth is a useful notion, but it is not the key to what there is, or to how we represent the world to ourselves through language.[5]

> [Truth is not] a deep and vital element of philosophical theory. . . . [T]he realism/anti-realism issue (together with various related

2. Michael Williams, "Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Scepticism," 424.

3. I shall base my account of deflationism on the writings of a number of philosophers. I want to emphasize that while there are important similarities in the ideas of the philosophers I rely on, there are also important differences. No views, unless explicitly attributed to the individual authors, should be ascribed to them.

4. Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, xiii.

5. Scott Soames, "What Is a Theory of Truth?" 429.

> questions in the philosophy of science) have nothing at all to do with truth.[6]

In short, deflationism holds that once we understand the meaning and function of 'true'—and this understanding, according to deflationism, is not hard to achieve—we shall see that truth has no substantial role to play in philosophy. Many contemporary philosophers find the deflationary account of 'true' attractive and plausible, and they have accepted (sometimes enthusiastically, sometimes regretfully) its negative verdict on the role of the concept of truth in philosophy.

I want to oppose deflationary attitudes in philosophy. The main problem with deflationism, in my view, lies in the descriptive account it gives of 'true'. The deflationary account makes (and, to sustain its conclusions, needs to make) some very strong claims about the meaning of 'true'—claims that on examination prove to be highly problematic. The account appears plausible, I think, only because we read its claims in a weaker way. But the weaker readings do not, I believe, yield any deflationary conclusions.

The argument I shall develop against deflationism, then, is this. The deflationary description of 'true', when it is taken in the strong and intended way, motivates the deflationary conclusions but is highly problematic. On the other hand, when it is taken in the weaker way, the description is correct enough but does not yield the deflationary conclusions. I shall substantiate this by considering deflationary arguments on two issues: the possibility of a physicalistic theory of truth (§1.3) and truth and meaning (§1.4). Deflationists take the concept of truth to be transparent, one capable of a complete and simple philosophical analysis. Toward the end of the chapter (§1.5) I shall point out some reasons to think that truth is a highly puzzling notion, one that defies all our attempts at its analysis.

6. Paul Horwich, *Truth*, 54.

1.2. The Disquotational Theory

Let us consider the disquotational account of the meaning of 'true', which we encountered briefly in the extract from Williams.[7] Its original source is the following well-known passage from W. V. Quine's *Philosophy of Logic*:[8]

> By calling the sentence ['snow is white'] true, we call snow white. The truth predicate is a device of disquotation. We may affirm the single sentence by just uttering it, unaided by quotation or by the truth predicate; but if we want to affirm some infinite lot of sentences that we can demarcate only by talking about the sentences, then the truth predicate has its use. We need it to restore the effect of objective reference when for the sake of some generalization we have resorted to semantic ascent. (p. 12)

Stephen Leeds provides, in the following extract, a useful elaboration of the disquotational account:

> It is not surprising that we should have use for a predicate P with the property that " '____' is P" and "____ " are always interdeducible.

7. Deflationists have offered several closely related descriptions of 'true'. In this paper I choose to focus on just one description—that contained in the disquotational account. Nevertheless, the arguments developed below apply in a straightforward way to many other deflationary descriptions. One notable exception is the strand of deflationism that relies on the Prosentential Theory of Truth of Dorothy Grover, Joseph Camp, and Nuel Belnap. A development of this strand can be found in Dorothy Grover's essays in *Prosentential Theory of Truth* and in Robert Brandom's "Pragmatism, Phenomenalism, and Truth Talk." My view is that the Prosentential Theory has important insights into the logical grammar of truth. But these insights need to be supplemented with subsidiary theses before we can derive deflationary conclusions from them. I would want to argue that the subsidiary theses are problematic.

8. Although Quine's writings have provided much inspiration to the deflationists, a reasonable case can be made that Quine himself is no deflationist. First, the concept of truth seems to play a substantial role in Quine's philosophy of logic. Second, Quine takes a skeptical attitude toward many of the notions used in the defense of deflationism.

> For we frequently find ourselves in a position to assert each sentence in a certain infinite set z (e.g., when all the members of z share a common form); lacking the means to formulate infinite conjunctions, we find it convenient to have a single sentence which is warranted precisely when each member of z is warranted. A predicate P with the property described allows us to construct such a sentence: $(x)(x \in z \rightarrow \mathrm{P}(x))$. Truth is thus a notion that we might reasonably want to have on hand, for expressing semantic ascent and descent, infinite conjunction and disjunction. And given that we want such a notion, it is not difficult to explain how it is that we have been able to invent one.[9]

The core thought here is that the function of the truth-predicate is to serve certain expressive purposes, namely, that of expressing certain infinite conjunctions and disjunctions. The truth-predicate serves these functions in virtue of its disquotational character, that is, in virtue of the fact that it undoes the effect of quotation marks.[10] For example, the role of 'true' in

(1) 'snow is white' is true

is to cancel the quotation marks: (1) says no more nor less than the sentence

snow is white.

We shall get clearer on the disquotational theory if we consider a situation in which, as Quine puts it, "we want to affirm some

9. Stephen Leeds, "Theories of Reference and Truth," 121.

10. The presence of ambiguity, context-sensitivity, self-reference, etc., in our language poses a challenge to the disquotational account. It forces us to recognize, for instance, that truth is not a simple predicate of sentences. I shall assume, for the sake of argument, that the deflationists can meet the challenge. I shall often write as if the problematic elements were not present in our language. Also, when the context allows it, I shall suppress relativity to language. I shall write 'true' in place of the longer 'true in English'.

infinite lot of sentences." Suppose we wish to affirm all sentences of the form

____ & snow is white [= *A*, say].

That is, we want to affirm the conjunction of all sentences obtained by filling the blank in *A* with sentences of English:

(2) [Sky is blue & snow is white] & [Chicago is blue & snow is white] & ....

We lack explicit and direct means of formulating the infinite conjunction, but the truth-predicate, according to Quine and Leeds, provides us with an indirect means. Observe that we cannot generalize on the '____' position in *A* using ordinary first-order variables. We cannot say, for example,

For all *x*: *x* & snow is white.

For the variable '*x*' is pronominal and occupies name positions; it cannot meaningfully be put in sentence positions. The way the truth-predicate helps here, according to the disquotational account, is this. The disquotational feature of truth makes (2) equivalent to

(3) ['Sky is blue' is true & snow is white] & ['Chicago is blue' is true & snow is white] & ...

But the position '____' in

____ is true & snow is white

is nominal and can be quantified using the pronominal variable '*x*'. We can say,

(4) For all sentences *x*: [*x* is true & snow is white].

But (4) is equivalent to (3) and, consequently, in virtue of disquotation, to (2). The truth-predicate thus provides us with a means of expressing the infinite conjunction (2). Truth is, on the disquotational account, essentially a logical device. It enables us to generalize over sentence positions *while using pronominal variables such as 'x'* and, thus, endows us with additional expressive power.

It will be useful to separate out four component ideas of the disquotational theory.

The Disquotation Thesis: The truth-predicate is a device of disquotation.
The Infinite Conjunction Thesis: The truth-predicate enables us to express certain infinite conjunctions and disjunctions; (4), for instance, expresses (2) and (3).[11]
The Generalization Thesis: The truth-predicate provides a means for generalizing over sentence positions even when the variables are pronominal.
The Connection Thesis: The truth-predicate serves its expressive functions in virtue of its disquotation feature.[12]

The first two of these theses contain important ambiguities. Let us demarcate a little the sense in which the deflationists understand these theses (and need to understand them).

Let us call instances of the form

(T) '____' is true if and only if ____

11. I suppose I should call this thesis 'The Infinite Conjunction and Disjunction Thesis', but I want to save a few syllables.

12. See Horwich, *Truth*, 52 and 127. Recall also Quine's statement, "we *need* [a disquotational truth-predicate] to restore the effect of objective reference when for the sake of some generalization we have resorted to semantic ascent" (emphasis added).